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An Accidental Journey through Tibet

Charles Poynton

2002

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**Seven Weeks in Tibet  
2002**

**Charles Poynton**



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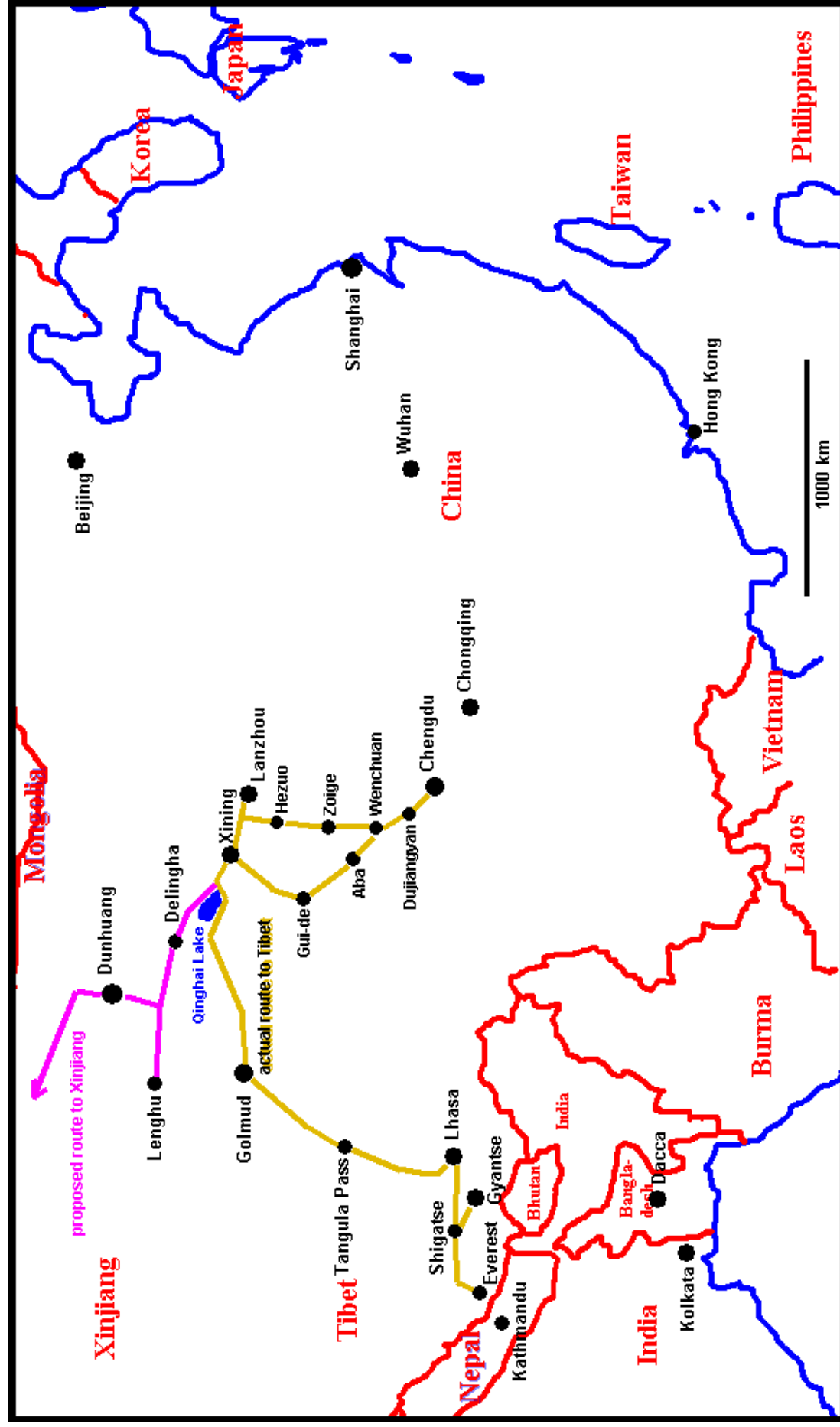
# Contents

Map of Route	
Introduction	1
Chengdu	3
Settling In	9
Outings in the Mountains	19
West Sichuan	31
A Journey to the West	65
A Day with Intelligence	97
Travelling West from Qinghai Lake	101
Lhasa bound	111
Around Lhasa	123
The Friendship Highway	143
A Few Days at Qomolangma Base Camp	163
Accident near Shigatse	171
Dealing with the Police	191
Rong to the Rescue	195
Trip to Gyantze	201
The Boy Wakes	211
Meeting with the Police	213
Leaving Shigatse	215
Crossing the Tibetan Plateau	221
Traversing Qinghai	237
Gansu	247
Back in Chengdu	259
 Bibliography	
Index	
 Appendix 1: Statement to Shigatse Police	
Appendix 2: Tibet travel log	













## Introduction

As a small boy, I was fascinated by my father's encyclopedia and particularly the maps therein. My mind wandered to America and Canada, Iceland and what is this country here, Dad? "That was Tibet, but it is no more. They were invaded by China." Even as a small boy, I learned of the existence of the country, this mysterious realm high in the Himalayas, and looked at the pictures and read a little. Revisiting the Chambers Encyclopedia of 1948, it is hard to believe I understood it all.

During the 1960s, my attention was with China. Mao was building a Communist state with which I was highly sympathetic, but which was forever portrayed as a nation of endless mob violence, merciless killings and propaganda. This view I came to believe was American and Nationalist Chinese lies, and that the truth was that there was happy and peaceful development throughout the land. In 1968, I read a book by Felix Greene, titled "China Awakes – How America is deceived". It painted a very positive picture of Communist China and showed the Americans and the Nationalist Government of Chiang Kai Shek in an extremely negative light, as purveyors of far-right propaganda. I subscribed to "China Reconstructs" and "Peking Review" and in about 1967 obtained a little red book – The Thoughts of Mao Tse Tung.

In the late 1960s, one book I received from the Beijing Foreign Languages publishing house was "Tibet Today", which demonstrated that the Chinese were bringing modern agriculture, education, medicine and industry to the people of Tibet. This I accepted was closer to the truth than the relentless carping the world made then about what the Chinese were doing to the Tibetans.

With the opening of China to the West in 1972, with recognition of the Communist regime by the United States and Australia, I felt that matters were improving. Nixon and Gough Whitlam both visited Mao in Beijing and in the latter case at least he came across as a rather kindly old man. Were it that it the truth. The world was flooded by academic treatises on China, many written by Australians. Two of these were Colin Mackerras and particularly Stephen Fitzgerald, who was soon to be the Australian Ambassador to China.

Fast forward to 1981. By some accident, I landed a job as a petroleum geophysicist in a remote corner of China, in the province of Qinghai. I spent from June to November 1981 in China, most of it in and around a small oil town called Lenghu, at an elevation of 2800 metres, with a crew of Chinese who had been sent there thirteen years before. I got to know a few of these workers quite well, especially Mr Zhou, a petroleum engineer. He and a British colleague told me some things about the Cultural Revolution which I might otherwise have not believed. Up until then, I understood that the Cultural Revolution had been a force for good, rooting out backward practices and beliefs which impeded the development of China. Mr Zhou and Ms Bailey both described scenes of terror and torture, people's lives being taken for the most trivial of reasons. My conclusion was that everything I had heard

## Introduction

and read about China were lies. I wondered if Taiwan might be better example to the world of Chinese civilisation and culture in action.

Not that it was all negative. I had visited most of the tourist sights in and around Beijing, and had established friendships with some people I had met in the streets. By taking a ten-speed bicycle to Beijing, I had given myself the opportunity to explore the city quite thoroughly during the month that I had been obliged to wait around before being mobilised out to Qinghai. The people of Beijing were open and friendly. One young man invited me to his family's flat, where I got to see how ordinary people lived. Or did I? His father had been an opera singer, travelled to Moscow and there were photographs of Dad with a large group of the political elite. Some of the faces had been scratched out. "Why?" I asked. "Gang of Four" was the reply.

These months in China had been spent entirely in the north of the country, and in the thrall of the Company. I had been working for an American geophysical outfit and they called all the shots about where I went, what I did and how long I was there. It was not a paid tourist adventure. When they sent you to an incredibly grubby town, put you in a grotty hotel and told you to stay there for the duration, that was what they wanted. I was being paid \$US2000 per month to be a geophysicist, not a sightseer.

In November 1981, I left China, disappointed particularly by the ordinary field workers I had to supervise. Not only were they phenomenally lazy, but they also went out of their way to sabotage equipment and machinery to render it non-operational. My own Toyota Landcruiser was rolled and written off during a field break, but this was not the only case. Most of the vehicles were seriously damaged while I was there. I also got to see a broad swath of northern China and everywhere there was dust, filth and the army.

After departing China for Australia, I did not really consider revisiting the country for a long time. With the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989, I became quite unsympathetic to the Communist Chinese government and waited until the country had had some sort of democratic revolution before visiting again.

In the mid 1990s, the Dalai Lama visited Australia. As he was giving an address at the Perth Entertainment Centre, I went along with 8,000 others to see him and was struck by the man's humility and good humour. This contrasted dramatically with the extreme language and actions of the Chinese. By 2001, democracy was no closer to becoming a reality and I started to feel that it would be better to be there when the old order gave way to the new. Revolts had occurred in Eastern Europe, Russia and the Philippines and I felt as though I was a distant bystander when they happened. If I spent some years in China, I might see a huge change from close quarters.

With the offer of a job in the southwestern city of Chengdu in late 2001, I was attracted to working there and using it as a base to explore the mountains seventy kilometres to the west of that city. Maybe I would get to see some Tibetans and possibly I would witness a democratic change in China. I left Perth for Chengdu in February 2002, to take up a job as an English teacher.

## Chengdu

Sally was waiting for me at the International Arrivals hall at Chengdu Airport. She was quite tall, with long hair and had an attractive round face. She was dressed fashionably and immediately I was struck by one change in the years since I was last in China. In those days, young women dressed very drably, usually in blue Mao uniforms. She showed me to a Toyota Hi-Ace van and sat in the front with the driver while I was alone in the back. Shortly we were on an elevated expressway into the city and I watched the advertising hoardings and plenty of large buildings go by. We briefly discussed my previous experience of China, and she wanted to know if I had been to Dunhuang. Yes, I had visited this famous Buddhist site in the desert of western China, but at the time it was undiscovered as a tourist destination.

The Chengdu landscape was flat and the sky rather smoggy, smoggier even than Japan, where I had been living until a few months earlier. Altogether, I had spent seven months in that country, some of it looking for work and much of it travelling around with a friend in her little car, seeing the mountains, rural landscape, villages and beaches of that fascinating country. It was a very interesting experience, but finding work in Japan was another matter. There are plenty of middle-aged men in Japan working as English teachers, too many one might say. What the Japanese really want are pretty young women and I did not fit the selection criteria. Furthermore, I had no teaching experience, having done a basic English teaching qualification in Perth immediately before going to Japan but never having had a job in the area. While in Japan in October 2001, I put my resume on the Net, hoping I might get a call. I had scanned the English language press and had been through every conceivable list of schools, posting or faxing my resume and getting very little response.

Japan did need English teachers, but in the countryside. The fundamental problem with teaching in rural Japan is that of isolation. As a foreign teacher in a small town, you are the only English speaker and thus have no companionship. As often as not, your time is spent in a small box that passes for accommodation with nothing but a television set for entertainment. There is, however, an opportunity in this. Being isolated from English speakers, you have no choice but to pick up some Japanese. In September, I bought a car with a view to travelling the country by myself, knocking on doors at schools until I found a place where I could teach English. The car I bought was a very spacious Volvo 940 station wagon, in which I could put my stuff and if necessary, sleep. Hotels are quite pricey in Japan, so if you travel for a month or two, you could quickly run out of money. Even without staying in hotels and living my friend's hospitality, Japan was quite expensive enough. I was getting through about \$2000 per month despite every attempt to be economical. It is simply not a cheap place to stay.

The Volvo was bought at an auction and paid for before taking possession. However, as I drove out of the auction yard, I noticed a problem. It remained stuck in first gear. I had gone to a great deal of trouble to organise the purchase: it is not easy for foreigners to own a car and drive it around Japan. Indeed, the first people consulted about buying a car had insisted that it was



## Chengdu

impossible. It did turn out to be possible, but a bureaucratic nightmare of the first magnitude. The Japanese authorities make it difficult and expensive for anyone to own a car in Japan, foreign or otherwise. Foreigners have the additional burden of having to find their way through the maze with a considerable language barrier in the way. It had taken six weeks to get the fundamentals in place so that I could purchase and store a vehicle in Japan. This had cost more than a thousand dollars, and the car about five thousand. Then I found it would not change gear. This problem was serious and the car was unsuitable for travel around Japan. Instead of being an asset, it was a liability, as I had to pay to store it and ultimately, for repairs.

With the travel plan in tatters and no job, living in an expensive country with a woman who thought I was a parasite, I had to find a job. I put my details on the Internet.

Within a few days, I had emails, offering me work. These were encouraging, but came with problems of their own. The offers were for English teaching in China.

The first offer was in Shenyang. I had never heard of the place and for lack of better information, I went to the English language bookstore in central Kobe and checked out the Lonely Planet guide to China. "Grim" was the adjective which registered in my mind, plus the climate was bleak. Though it was only early November, the place was frozen solid. This did not appeal to me at all. Shenyang is a major industrial city in Manchuria, formerly known as Mukden, population six million, full of coal, steelworks and smokestacks. I considered flying to Shenyang, which was not that far from Kobe, to check the place out, but the fares were astronomical, nearly as much as flying back to Australia.

A telephone call came from Chengdu, another city in China of which I had never heard. Again, I checked out the Lonely Planet guide and also an atlas, to find the Chengdu had a far more agreeable climate and was close to the eastern extreme of the Himalayas. In my conversation with the woman in Chengdu, one thing she did admit was that the air in Chengdu was polluted. I decided this negative feature was more than offset by the proximity to the mountains, some over 7000 metres high and only a few hundred kilometres from the city. Indeed, looking at the maps I had, I supposed it might be possible to see snowy peaks from the city on a clear day.

My Japanese visa was about to expire. I managed to get my car onto a ship to Australia, where it could be repaired at far less expense than in Japan and would be a very attractive ornament outside my home in Perth. In the middle of November, I flew back to Perth.

Once in Australia, I was again in contact with the Chengdu University of Technology. They had a dinosaur museum and had previously been a geological institute, so I was further attracted to working there. If I did go, wanted my own transport, as had been the case during my previous stint in the country. Travelling in your own car is infinitely more pleasurable than dealing with the hassles of buses, trains and taxis. You can stop where you

## Chengdu

want, enjoy the scenery and the people, then move on. You can never stop a bus or train, and taxis are an expensive way to get around. Basically, I could take the Volvo to China, but the transport and taxes would be prohibitively expensive. Maybe I could buy a car there.

So, I was now in Chengdu. I had supposed from my reading that the university was on the west side of the city, closer to those mountains. Sitting in the back of the Hi-Ace van, I found myself completely disoriented, except that if the airport was on the southwest of the city, we did not seem to be going to the west side. "Is the university on west side of Chengdu?" I asked Sally.

"No, it is on the east."

From my reading, I was aware that this was the industrial district of the city, immediately striking a vein of depression. We continued onto an elevated section of the ring road, then made a right turn. The landscape became even more depressing, with grimy hovels lining a dirt road choked with trucks, tractors, motorcycles and pedestrians. Pale blue plastic bags were scattered along the right hand side among the trees, in the ditches and next to stalls selling snacks, cigarettes, drinks and liquor. These bags were among piles of refuse and themselves often filled with household waste. Plainly there was no rubbish collection in this area and no consciousness of tidiness or hygiene. If anything, what I was seeing was worse than anything I had encountered in China in 1981. Well, maybe. I had not yet seen any toilets.

When travelling through China all those years previously, even toilets in the towns and cities left a great deal to be desired. Most of my travel had been soft class on trains and then staying in the best hotels available. On the train, you had to squat over a hold in the floor, with the track below and drop your stuff onto the ballast as you whizzed by. The hotels were generally fitted with Western flush toilets, so things there were not much different to now. One time in Dunhuang, however, the hotel bathroom had still to be fitted out. I had to walk some distance to a public toilet.

One of those things I learnt early in my stay in China were the characters for "man" ( a picture of a field with some legs below) and "woman" (she had her legs crossed). The men's toilets are usually on the right: I came to the entry and there was a sight to behold. Between the door and the very basic troughs which served as urinals, the floor was covered in turds. Rather than pick their way through to the latrine pits, men had just squatted anywhere and dropped their shit in heaps. I dodged these and went to the pits, themselves set about by piles of crap where people had crouched, squeezed and missed the hole. There was no sign of toilet paper anywhere. Plainly no-one used the stuff, though limited supplies could be seen in some stores. Down with my trousers and took a shit. You had to carry your own toilet paper of course.

Even in Beijing in 1981, the public toilets were nasty latrines. Tractor-drawn trailers laden with "nightsoil" plied the streets. I recall seeing one out of my office window at the Foreign Trade Centre as it travelled by. The shit was pile high on the trailer, covered by a few bags, and on top of all of this were the

## Chengdu

four workers whose job it was to shovel the product out of the latrines. They were all lying on the bags, asleep. I could only hope that there had been some progress on the toilet front, though I felt assured that facilities for foreign teaching staff would not be too basic. Still, given the general disorder of the neighbourhood, I felt there was little reason for optimism.

The Toyota van arrived at a dusty intersection, then headed down a narrow laneway, lined with shops on either side. There was scarcely room for the vehicle to manoeuvre between these shops, crowds of pedestrians and oncoming vehicles. We slowed to a walking pace, even stopped. Horns were blaring, the driver had to pull over to let an oncoming vehicle pass, and young people just wandered along in front, oblivious to the obstruction they were causing to our progress. The car arrived at a gate guarded by men in uniform who saluted as though we were army generals, then entered a wide promenade. We were at Chengdu University of Technology.

At the end of the entry promenade was a stainless steel sculpture, very large, very shiny and very ugly. It smacked strongly of Stalin and depicted a muscular worker wielding a hammer. Another outside the cinema was of young naked woman in a dramatic, aerial pose. In the recent past, I had observed many statues of naked Western females in Kobe (dozens, if not hundreds of them) and had mused upon the identity and motivations of whosoever had decided to decorate Kobe with such figures – presumably middle-aged, sexually-obsessed males. Doubtless too, there are lots of middle-aged, sexually-obsessed men running Chinese universities.

So we passed by the statue, along a tree-lined, cracked, concrete roadway, past the dinosaur museum, to the Foreign Guest House. I unloaded my thirty or so kilograms of baggage and was shown to an apartment on the fourth floor, which I was assured would be only temporary. Later I would get to join the staff in another section, but had to make do until a problem with the plumbing was rectified.

My quarters were quite cramped and rather dingy. The living room was clustered with far more furniture than was necessary, nor was the furniture itself comfortable. The sofa and the two associated chairs were padded in Chinese style, which is to say that they had wooden slats and no cushions. There was a substantial coffee table in the middle and a huge colour television set by the desk next to the window. All of this was in a room about three metres square, so there was precious little space for humans (I later had most of the furniture removed, making for more space and comfort). On one side of the living-room was the bedroom, with two single beds, a chest of drawers and no wardrobe. The only free space in this room was the 60cm between the beds.

On the other side of the living room was the kitchen, a Spartan affair with a tiny refrigerator, two burner stove, about 30cm of bench for preparation, and a huge sink with no plug and no hot water. There were no cooking pots, no cutlery, only a couple of soup bowls and cups. With these facilities it was really only feasible to prepare tea for oneself: meals were out of the question.



Indeed, I later became convinced that this was to persuade the teaching staff to take meals prepared by the guesthouse manager, meals which were generally quite atrocious and for which a substantial proportion of your 3000 RMB monthly salary was sequestered.

Adjacent to the kitchen was the bathroom, which, though rather aged, was acceptable. The fit-out was reminiscent of those I recall from the fifties in Australia: green terrazzo floor, a basic handbasin with cold water only, and a shower. The hot water was supplied by an instantaneous gas heater in the kitchen. This was a rather cantankerous affair requiring some adjustment to deliver water at the correct temperature. As the shower was fed directly from the heater without the benefit of a cold water supply, you had to get it right. Often it extinguished itself mid-shower, resulting in some unpleasantness until it was re-ignited.

The decoration of these Foreign Guesthouse apartments (“flats” might be a better word for them) which were usually only about 35 square metres, was quite ghastly and represented maybe what Chinese imagined was popular in the West about forty years ago. The walls were papered with peeling beige paper, having a pressed floral pattern but mostly boasting several decades of dirt, fingerprints and fly excrement. The red floral carpet had big bare patches and was blacked by years of soot from the local power station. The beds had pastel candlewick bedspreads several decades old. On the living-room wall hung a decorative light fitting depicting a quarter moon and some stars, which glowed a seductive red if ever turned on.

After moving into my room, I was taken to meet my new boss. She was Ms Yang, a retired woman geologist of about sixty, who dressed quite plainly in clothing of a post-Cultural Revolution style. She wore her hair quite short, as is common of Chinese of her era and made no pretence of following fashion. Despite her plain looks and dress, she spoke good and rather gravelly English and did not engage in nor accept any nonsense. It was she to whom I had spoken on the phone several times, and had been honest enough to admit that Chengdu’s air was polluted.

Practically the first thing that Ms Yang told me was that there would be no classes for several weeks. Apparently the enrolments had not yet been sorted out, so we had until the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February to ourselves. She then reimbursed as much as she could of my travel expenses and gave me my first month’s salary in advance. Suddenly and rather unexpectedly, my pockets were stuffed with money, a fortune in the eyes of many Chinese but only about a week’s pay for an Australian worker

On my second day, I went for a walk with Joe, a young American who was joining the school as well. Indeed, there were four of us starting that semester, the other two being American women. Joe had long, black, wavy hair, a goatee beard and very dark, almost black, eyes. Though his features were Caucasian, he told me later that his father was an Afro-American. His nose was very straight and prominent, and his face thin and angular. These features

## Chengdu

he had inherited from his white mother. A small stainless steel bar pieced his tongue.

Our walk took us out of the chaotic main gates of the university, crowded in with shops, stalls, pedestrians, mud and vehicles that I had passed through the day before, then along a busy road nearby. Joe would say “Ni hao!” to most passers-by, so he was quite busy. He had arrived in China for the first time a few days before, and this was his first experience of Asia. He accepted without question all the grunge that was so common – the rubbish, the dirt, the noise, potholes, piles of coal, beggars, and men pulling carts loaded with meat, waste or people. Perhaps this was because he was from Cleveland, itself an industrial slum.

Joe and I walked maybe a kilometre, crossed a railway and turned right. Shortly we passed a bicycle shop, where I paused to check out the wares and concluded that though they were cheap, even the fanciest cycle on sale was junk. The frame flexed, the gears did not function, the steering was vague and altogether it was far too low for comfort. Even with the seat at the highest setting, it was possible for me to hit my knees on the handlebars. Buying a bike was going to be a struggle.

We continued our walk, crossed the same railway again, then turned right. I knew a road followed the rail back whence we had come, otherwise there was going to be nothing for some time. I did not want to repeat my experience of my first night in Beijing, twenty-one years earlier.

While staying at the Beijing Friendship Hotel in 1981, I went for a walk on my first night in the city. It was located on a large city block, which I decided to walk around. After leaving the main gates, I walked a few hundred metres south, turned right, several hundred metres west, turned right again, then went a few more hundred metres... to find myself in a maze of alleyways. A crowd of curious Chinese who had probably never seen a foreigner in those parts before gathered around. No-one could understand English. It took quite a while to sort out the best route and continue around the block, during which time I could have been mugged, picked up by the police or dragged into a brothel. It was an unnecessary risk and a bit frightening, though interesting to see people living their lives close-up. The street lights were centres of society, with groups gathered around playing chess or gambling, reading papers and under at least one, a girl was doing her homework. Why pay for a light in your home when you can have one for free in the street?

Back to Joe and I walking around the backblocks of Chengdu. We wandered past a yard where coal was unloaded from trains, stockpiled and then loaded onto trucks for delivery. All the dirt Joe and I had seen up to now paled to insignificance compared to the unmitigated black of hundreds of tonnes of coal. Men and women were shovelling it out of trains, into wheelbarrows and into trucks. We got some curious looks as we walked by. Plainly they were unused to seeing foreign faces here. A couple trucks came by, hooting as they went and we stepped out of their way. Soon we were on the main road and on our way back to campus.

## Settling In

Within a few days, the new teachers had to go for a medical exam. Though I had been required to have a medical examination in order to get a visa to enter China, it was somehow unacceptable to the local immigration people. Having paid a couple of hundred of dollars for the Australian medical exam, I was a bit put out that I had to pay many hundreds more yuan for a Chinese repeat. Furthermore, there were some risks involved. I put my arm into a hole in the wall and someone on the other side took some blood. What with? Was it sterile? Who can say, except that China had the highest incidence of medically-transmitted HIV in the world, in no small way related to their haphazard re-use of instruments during blood tests.

There was scant privacy. We all stood around and were examined in each other's presence. The doctors looked up our noses and into our ears, weighed



us and put us onto ECGs, shirt-free. The two American women in our group were spared the indignity of having to strip off their blouses in front of us, so we stood off in the distance while they were being examined. I even had an ultrasound, checking if there was anything wrong with my innards.

Then I had to take the completed forms over to the registry. Rather than finding my own form on top, as one might reasonably expect, there was Mary's. I tried hard to avert my eyes out of consideration for her privacy, but failed.

With nothing to do for three weeks, all of the foreign staff tended to go out quite a lot in the day and evenings. The campus was some way out from the city centre, about six kilometres in fact. Naturally enough, there was a bus service to the city, the number 8. This service was very regular, as you might expect from a university campus, so a walk to the bus stop was soon rewarded by some movement. This



**Martha has her vision checked**

## Settling in

is not to say that it was comfortable. The seating was entirely of stainless steel, which when combined with the rather hard suspension, meant that your bottom felt all the potholes along the route to the city. And the route it followed was through “Mordor” – the complex of filth, dust, grime and rubbish I had been driven through as I arrived at the campus for the first time.

An Irish geologist, Andrew, returned from his winter holiday. He had climbed Mt Emei, a peak of some 3200m a couple of hundred kilometres to the southeast of Chengdu. From his clothing, I gathered that this was a full-on mountaineering exercise, but a later visit revealed a stairway to the top, amply supplied with pavilions in which to rest and appreciate the view. There are also little kiosks which might provide the weary traveller with snacks, confectionary and bottled water. Andrew had been at CDUT for six months and qualified as the expat expert on the city. He told me that there were about 140 foreigners in Chengdu, out of population of 11 million. We were thus a rather rare commodity.



**Sun Yat-sen memorial**

wish I had one again. But what would I do with it? It was good to think that this street was here and at any time I could go and buy all sorts of chemical goodies for super-cheap prices.

Nearby were the city flower markets. Not only did they have a wide range of flowers, but also of potted plants, again all at prices which would make people in

With Andrew as my guide, I was taken to see various quarters of Chengdu, including streets full of ramshackle old buildings in traditional style. Elsewhere, there was lots of concrete construction, most of it inordinately ugly but probably easier to live in. One street of dilapidated old buildings had many shops that sold chemical glassware: retorts, burettes, cooling tubes, Erlenmeyer flasks, Bunsen burners, beakers, measuring cylinders and the list goes on. I felt very inclined to buy some of this gear, as I had had a very imposing chemistry set in my teens and sometimes



**Chenxi Road by night**



the developed world salivate. In later times, I spent hours wandering through the flower markets, selecting indoor plants to soften the somewhat stark architecture of university apartments.

The commercial heart of Chengdu is ChenXi Road, a pedestrian district with a statue of a seated Sun Yat-Sen in the main plaza and all about there were boutiques, mostly catering for girly tastes in clothing. It should be said in mitigation that there were also bars, a camera shop, cinema and a large Japanese department store, Ito Yokado. The latter was to become my shopping haven while in Chengdu, selling many western foods as well as Japanese, and also having a large food court on its fifth floor. Regrettably, they did not sell Weetbix, muesli or fresh milk. Being Japanese-owned, this is perhaps understandable.

Often we hung out in the city centre until early evening. There were restaurants and a bit of life, whereas existence in the Foreign Guesthouse was rather dull. The problem was that the number 8 bus stopped running at 8:30pm and the last one was always full. On a number of occasions, we waited for the bus, only to find it packed to the gills when it arrived. In that case, we had to catch a taxi. Once when I did catch the bus, I was crammed right against the windscreen and had the exhilarating experience of being driven through the darkened neighbourhoods at speed with my nose right against the glass. A bit too exhilarating, actually.

The first time I rode in a taxi in Chengdu, I was also exhilarated. I was seated in the passenger seat, in front on the right-hand side. This position was weird after decades of driving on the left, so as we travelled I felt unnerved by not having a steering wheel and brake pedals. I sure needed the brakes. The driver went at about 100kph along dark streets with his headlights off, swerving to avoid unlit tractors, cyclists, pedestrians and trucks that loomed out of the gloom. No-one was using their lights. I arrived back at CDUT, scared shitless and 50 yuan lighter to add insult to injury. I swore I would try to get my own transport.

Somewhere on the route of the number 8, I saw a flash-looking bicycle shop. The next time I passed, I alighted and went in to investigate. A variety of bikes were available, the one which appealed to me most being a top-of-the-range model, a Giant *Hunter*. It was a hybrid bike with mudguards and a luggage carrier on the back and eighteen speed gears. The frame was big enough for me and it rode like a dream. I would use this to explore Chengdu and be independent of crowded or non-existent buses, or lunatic taxis. At 900 RMB, it cost the equivalent of about 20 – 30 one-way taxi rides from the city. I paid the man with Hong Kong dollars and rode the bike back to the university.

## Settling in



**Riding my new Giant Hunter bicycle, before I found a crash helmet**

On the way, riding through Mordor, I suddenly had an oncoming mini-van execute a turn across my path. I swerved violently to avoid him, running off the road into a ditch, and never did understand why we did not collide. He must have braked at the last minute. In any case, such incidents could result in head injuries which are hard to fix and would not do me any good whatsoever. I resolved to get a bike helmet. This proved to more difficult than buying a bike, what with few Chinese being concerned about issues like road safety. It took months before I could find any lights.

An aside here: this was the first time in the history of foreign English teachers at CDUT – stretching over the past twenty or thirty years – that one had bought a bicycle. Andrew was later to emulate me, but was slack about security and within a few days his “Flying Pigeon” clunker had gone. I attached mine to something solid with a substantial padlock and chain and had no problems (until I chained it to a plastic pipe), whereas foolish Andrew thought the students would leave his unsecured new bike alone.

Lacking lights for the bicycle and with things like the above incident happening in broad daylight, I was reluctant to cycle at night. Walking was worse, however. Crossing a major road at night was literally a matter of taking your life into your hands, hoping that you could see a vehicle (not always possible as so many travelled unlit) and get out of its way. The carriageways were often very wide, unlit, and even where there were traffic

lights the trucks and taxis would charge through red lights regardless. As for pedestrian crossings, they were simply painted on the road. If you were caught on one by a speeding car, they might hoot at you but usually not slow down. The only way out of this situation was to buy a car oneself – a steel protective box.

Before I could get a car, I needed to get a driver's license. My boss, Yang Hui Dong, rang around and established how and where I could get one. She and everyone else were a bit surprised that I had had a license in Qinghai Province in 1981. I described how we Westerners in the province had to sit a 10-question test in English, with no practical exam, then given a license. They had to allow this because there were so few Chinese who could drive. Sometime in the past, I lost my Qinghai driver's license, so unfortunately I had to sit another test.

Ms Hui Dong and I arrived at the Road Transport Office and after some waiting and discussion, were told that I could sit the test right away. I rather thought it would be a good idea to actually study the book first, but the examiner considered this unnecessary. She went and got the exam paper and set it in front of me. What a surprise! Somehow I had expected a paper in English, but this was entirely in Chinese. The examiner told Hui Dong that she could help me, and what's more, we could buy a book of answers for 8 RMB! This seemed a good idea, so I immediately forked out the cash and had a reference guide. It was still in Chinese and I had the greatest difficulty getting far beyond the question numbers and the symbols for "Stop", "No left turn," etc etc. Not that Ms Hui Dong was much use either. She knew nothing about cars and driving, so all the Chinese was double-Dutch to her as well. Plainly I would have to get someone to help who understood driving, and I knew who that would be.

By this time, my English teaching had started. Mind you, the only classes were the evening classes for university staff, a group of about 20 younger people, most of them women. Ms Hwang was a Masters student, doing research into hydrogeology. She had recently obtained a motor driver's license and could speak good English, so I quickly arranged for her to come with me after the weekend, on Monday, to the Transport Office.

Another matter involving Ms Hwang comes to mind here. Being a hydrogeology major, I thought her the best person to ask about the quality of the piped water supply. Chengdu has a large mountain range close to hand, and you would think it possible to dam a mountain river and pipe potable water to the city, less than a hundred kilometres away. Indeed, a diversion dam was built at Dujiangyan, 65 km away, and a canal built to Chengdu, all in about 300BC. It is the oldest functioning water supply project in the world. Tap water was available, but we were supplied bottled water in 20 litre containers. If the tap water was safe, why bother with the bottled stuff? "Is the tap water safe to drink?" I asked Miss Hwang. "Yes."

## Settling in

So when the bottled water ran out, I drank from the tap. A few days later I was ill, and when I told Ms Yang Hui Dong that I had been drinking tap water, she was horrified. It *is* safe, but only after boiling for ten minutes.

Later, much later, I discovered that the university water supply was pumped from the canal that passed just outside the Foreign Guesthouse. That this was used for a potable water supply rather surprised me, as it was very turbid, rather like sewage. I had fondly imagined it was used exclusively for irrigation. The inlets to the University treatment plant were about a hundred metres downstream of the guest house, but right opposite I could see a length of 100mm sewer pipe, the sort attached to flush toilets, leading from someone's house into the canal. Doubtless there were thousands more of these upstream, between us and the Dujiangyan diversion dam. Apparently there is also input from everyone who has liquid waste to dispose of, including a chemical works. One of my master of science students told me that there was a problem with the concentrations of mercury in the water. I bought and drank bottled water exclusively thereafter.

Back to the driver's licence issue. Ms Hwang was pleased to come out to the Transport Office and help me with the test. We caught a taxi there and presented ourselves at the examination office, where we were taken in tow by an inspector, into his spacious private office, seated us at a coffee table, and presented us with the examination paper. Ms Hwang could help me. We had an hour to answer a hundred questions, not such a challenge as we had the answer book to hand. The questions were all in sections, so all we had to do was find the section, find the same question (pretty obvious because of all the coloured pictures) then copy in the correct answer – a, b, or c.

Some of the questions were a bit more difficult because there were no pretty pictures, in which case Ms Hwang had to actually read the question and find the same one in the answer book. This took a bit longer, but even so, we were finished in about half an hour. After checking through the answer sheet, we handed it to the superintendent.

Without even looking at the paper, the superintendent went straight to the license-issuing section, where I had to present them with sixty yuan and a couple of coloured photographs of myself. Shortly I was issued a plastic laminated foreigner's driver's license. Having this, and a residence visa in China, I could buy a car.

Somehow, I had expected the Chinese would have made things more difficult. In the immediate past, you had to have permission from your work unit (in my case, the university) to have a car. The university had provided a letter to say that I was permitted to have one and park it on campus. The only thing now was to go and buy a car. Which one?

No-one could tell me where to find cars for sale. I rode here and there and everywhere on the main roads in Chengdu, only to be frustrated by not seeing a single car sales establishment. Once I saw a collection of three second-hand

vehicles for sale, but without even testing them, decided not to go there. They all appeared quite battered and somehow if they had so many dings on the outside, I was sure the gizzards of the vehicle would be in no better condition.

After a week or so, I was told that there were saleyards in the south of Chengdu. This rather makes sense, because that part of the city is where people with money live: the factories were all built on the northeast side, so that the prevailing winds would blow atmospheric contaminants away from the centre. So I rode my bicycle to the south side, checked out a few sales establishments, then arranged for Hwang Yi to accompany me on a sales visit.

What I had in mind was a minivan, such as seemed quite common on the streets of Chengdu. These are set up as seven-seaters, so would be good for taking students on outings, or for camping trips. I went to a number of car yards in South Chengdu and found that I could not fit into the driver's seat of most. With the seat right back, my knees were jammed against the dashboard. You could envisage this becoming a real problem on a long trip or in a traffic accident. They were cheap though – the very cheapest being about 24,000RMB (\$4000 Australian) new. Similar light trucks were even less – about 16,000 RMB, but I did not entertain thoughts of buying one of them.

I was not about to buy the cheapest vehicle anyway. Mostly, they seemed very tinny, cramped, uncomfortable seats and no rear seating. If I were to carry a group of people anywhere, it needed more seats. Also, I wanted air conditioning. There were technical considerations as well. Most likely I would be driving at high altitude, which requires a pressure-compensated fuel injection system, whereas most of the vehicles had simple carburettor engines. I had to go up-range to get what I wanted.

Test-driving a vehicle was not a possibility in Chengdu in 2002. Chinese would simply buy a car on its looks or similar attributes. The car sales yards had no registered demonstrator vehicles and the best I could do was to drive a vehicle around a yard. One of the first I tried was a Beijing Jeep. These are tough, home-grown vehicles, modelled on their American namesakes. With five-speed transmission, diesel engine and air conditioning, the model I tried was attractive at the 54,000RMB asked, but there was a catch. It lacked power steering, requiring a driver with Arnold Schwarzenegger biceps. I left it in the yard.

Ms Hwang and I went into the Wuling dealer. I got to drive one around the showroom floor. For a little van, it had a bit more room than the rest and came with a 40,000km warranty, something of a novelty. What was more, it had optional air conditioning, five speed transmission and seven cloth seats. In driving the car, I commented to Hwang Yi that it was the strangest experience, driving on the right-hand side of the road. I decided that the Wuling was the vehicle for me. "A bit of a leap in the dark," was the thought that crossed my mind, but at 43,000RMB, not an expensive leap. If I got five year's use out of the vehicle, it would be a reasonable deal.

## Settling in

In fact, it turned out to be rather more than 43k, on the road, more like 52,000 RMB, what with tax, insurance, registration, pre-delivery and so on. I decided to order one, giving the dealer a deposit of 200 yuan to get the ball rolling. In a day or so, I would be back with the balance. Ms Hwang and I left the dealer, catching a taxi to where the number 8 route was alleged to pass. The taxi dropped us off at the wrong place and I found myself resorting to the GPS I was carrying to resolve the issue.

Over the previous month, I had calibrated a road map of Chengdu with my old GPS, establishing a more meaningful grid than A, B, C, ... across the top and 1, 2, 3 down the side. Chengdu is all rather similar to look at, and the street signs often are difficult enough for Chinese to sort out, let alone dumb foreigners like me. After a little while, the GPS resolved the problem and we walked a couple of hundred metres to the Second Ring Road and the number 8 bus. Shortly we were back on campus.

By this time, my regular English classes had started. Apart from an evening group, I had fourth-year English Major students several times a week. The first of these classes had been something of a surprise. I went to my classroom at a few minutes before it was due to start, lesson in hand, opened the door and there were about 25 young women, mostly pretty, well-dressed and sitting patiently, smiling. "Good morning," I said. "Good morning," chimed 25 sweet young voices together. From that moment onwards, I was delighted with the students I had in my classes. Well, mostly.

One of the best students was Crazy. She seemed a bit strange and promptly latched on to me after class. She could, however, speak English very fluently and for some reason I got the impression that despite her somewhat unbalanced demeanour, she was comfortable with money and honest. As Ms Hwang could not come with me to sort out the financial matters with the car, Crazy would substitute.

The first stop was the bank. Despite the large-ish sum of money involved, the Bank of China did not do bank cheques. If I needed 52,000 yuan, it had to be in cash. Considering that the biggest banknote is 100 yuan, it meant that I had to carry 520 x 100 yuan notes. For this I needed a daypack.

## Settling in



**with 52,000 RMB at the car dealers**

In dealing with the Bank of China, I had to make a telephone call to my bank in Australia to free up my account so I could transfer sufficient funds in one transaction. As it was the equivalent of \$12,000 (the Australian dollar was sick at the time), this was asking quite a lot. After about an hour of pissing around at the bank, I had the cash and Crazy and I went out and caught a taxi direct to the vehicle showroom. I was not going to travel by bus with a daypack full of cash.

Arriving at the showroom, there was more to-ing and fro-ing as the money was counted, counted again, a receipt issued, my details recorded and the delivery confirmed. The dealership would deliver the car to me at the university. Only a day or two later, a group of vehicle salesmen turned up, handed over the keys, said all the right things, and left. One of the salesmen expressed the opinion that he had never heard of a foreigner buying a Wuling before. Buying a car was far simpler, quicker and less bureaucratic than it had been in Japan a few months earlier.

The salesman's name, by the way, was a Wang Xiaofeng. There are many Wang Xiaofengs in China.



Settling in



**Salesman Wang Xiao Feng, new Wuling van and Crazy**



## Outings in the Mountains

My colleague Andrew had an acquaintance in the Geology Department who was willing to show us some geological features of the Chengdu area. We paid a visit to his office where we were entertained to a few maps and then arranged to visit some field locations. Andrew, the Professor and I made the first trip up to the Dujiangyan dam site, where we looked at a bit of outcrop, then to another location in the mountains to find a major fault. With his maps and my GPS, we looked and looked and found no sign whatsoever of the Longmenshan Fault, hundreds of kilometres long, with a huge throw that is a major tectonic feature in China. Andrew later commented that he thought Chinese geologists spent precious little time in the field and did not climb mountains. The professor had lost one of the world's major faults, mostly because his map did not accurately show its position.

“Would anyone be interested in coming on a trip into the mountains?” I asked the English students. At first, the reaction was somewhat muted. One reason, I discovered later, was that most students were aware of a couple of mountains in the southwest of China: Emei Shan and another rather closer to Chengdu, Qing Cheng Shan, and those were all there were. The evening students had first refusal, deciding without much reservation to put together an excursion to Dragon Pool Gorge, about 60km NW of Chengdu. One of the class had a staff meeting in the nearby town of Xindu, so we were to pick her up as we passed.

The others of us stopped for a meal as we passed through Xindu. There were some telephone communications with the missing staff member, Wang Xiaofeng. After we finished lunch, we arrived at a petrol station to find a rather angry Ms Wang who had been patiently waiting for an hour.

The Dragon Pool Gorge was something of a disappointment in some respects, because the lovely landscape seemed a bit overbuilt with paths, pavilions and souvenir stalls. As we walked up the gorge, the air was heavy with smoke and pollution. The impaired visibility seemed perfectly natural to Chinese but to me it detracted from an otherwise pristine environment. Also, at 1400m, its altitude was not really what I had in mind. I knew much higher mountains were in the district.

A few weeks later, the same staff and postgrad group accompanied me to Qing Cheng Shan, about 90km west of Chengdu near Dujiangyan. This was a rather more protracted exercise, involving a hike for several kilometres to the top of a 1600 metre mountain and riding down again by cable car. The journey down was particularly delightful, and I was singularly impressed by the silliness of one of the young women, the self-same Ms Wang who had been in such a temper on the previous trip.

Ms Wang and I had gone out on a date together before I had bought the car, riding bicycles through Chengdu. This was a somewhat uneven experience, as

## Outings to the Mountains

I had a nice hybrid bike and she had a rather rattly old clunker. Thus it was no work at all for me to bike along while Miss Wang struggled to keep up, what with a stiff and unlubricated one-speed machine that probably weighed twice as much as my hybrid. I resolved to get a second bike so that friends could cycle with me without having to suffer too much. With the purchase of the van, I could now drive friends around in airconditioned comfort. Miss Wang and Miss Yi benefited from this one weekend, when we visited a few historic buildings in Chengdu.

More major excursions were in the planning stages. With four classes of English majors, each with over twenty students, there was no shortage of volunteers for trips to the mountains. At first there were only a few brave souls who were prepared to risk such an adventure, as most of them, when asked their favourite activities, listed “sleeping”, “watching TV” and “shopping”. I wanted to open their hearts and minds to the nearby wilderness, of which I had had a few glimpses with the geology professor, and briefly at Qing Cheng Shan.

I was not the only English teacher with this sort of agenda. Andrew also planned to take students on an excursion, but for them to catch a bus to a town in the mountains, and then walk many kilometres to a campsite. This was all well and good, but I felt it involved taking a lot of students to some unknown location with a bare minimum of food, shelter, bedding and clothing. At least when you have a vehicle, it becomes possible to pick and choose locations, carry enough supplies and shelter, and to give up and return to the city if things are too difficult. When the time came, I assisted Andrew and Joe with this exercise, scouting the way for them, and then ferrying students and their baggage to the newly-established campsite.

About forty students and staff participated in this trip. It did involve suddenly arriving on the doorstep of a Qiang minority village, occupying one of their fields and generally subjecting them to some culture shock. Having been sequestered ten kilometres up a quiet valley from the nearest main road for a thousand years, enduring the Chinese as intruders but no foreigners at all, they were suddenly hosts to this. And they took it very well, laying on a dance and generally acting as though they were very pleased to see us.

My first camping trip was taken from near the same town, Wenchuan, which simply means “hot springs”. I had found a camping goods store in an underground market near Chengdu city centre. What they had was of questionable quality, but it was cheap and suited my need for a lot of gear for not much money. I bought two 4-person dome tents, six sleeping mats, a couple of sleeping bags, a few inflatable mattresses and a variety of other odds and ends for a grand total of about \$150. At a gas appliance shop on a nearby main road, I bought a gas cylinder, regulator, hose and a two-burner stove for about \$15 altogether. It was not fancy, but it sure was cheap. Similarly, I availed myself of some cookware, plastic crockery and enough other odds and ends to make camp cookery a possibility with a group of six students.

## Outings to the Mountains

Armed with this collection of gear, six students from the English major class, and all crammed into the little van, we headed up the expressway to Dujiangyan and then along the long and winding mountain road to Wenchuan.

It took about an hour to get from Chengdu to Dujiangyan, mostly because of the slow progress through the city. No matter what you do, cities slow you down. Once on the expressway, we could hike along as fast as the little Wuling would take us, which was about 90kph, as it was still being run in. For the 50km of motorway, we were charged 20RMB, a fairly standard sort of toll in much of China. When we arrived at Dujiangyan, it was lunchtime. Over the course of time, we located and frequently visited an economical, quick and generally excellent restaurant handy to our route. Seven of us would sit around and eat quickly before setting out for the mountains.

A tortuous, dangerous and potholed road welcomed for the next stretch, taking us up the valley of the Min River. This considerable stream flows several hundred kilometres, from the very border of Tibet, and supplies the Chengdu Plain with the water for irrigation. About thirty kilometres from Dujiangyan is the turnoff for the Wolong Panda sanctuary at Yingxiu, but we were heading further afield. Wenchuan is 87 kilometres from Chengdu, and from there we could travel west another forty kilometres to the valley of Sheng Meng. Andrew told me that I would find Tibetans there.

In case you think driving on narrow, winding, potholed roads in the mountains is of no particular concern, let me try to tell you about it. The road was only single carriageway, had slopes of maybe 1:8, and twisted around blind bends. Above were mountainsides for thousands of metres, potentially dropping rocks on you at any moment, while ten or fifty or a hundred metres below, unprotected by crash barriers of any effectiveness, were the swirling, tumbling waters of the Min River.

There was plenty of evidence that the crash barriers were ineffective, because there were frequent holes in them where cars, trucks and buses, probably fully-laden with passengers, took the plunge. The Min River is not only wide and turbulent, but deep and cold, and few Chinese can swim. I had burdened myself with the responsibility of taking out six students and bringing them home, safe and sound. These students were the treasured only children of couples now beyond reproductive age, so they were irreplaceable.

Hundreds of trucks lined the road, heavily laden, far beyond the legal limit in any Western country. They crawled up the snaking mountain road, often at as little as ten kilometres per hour. There was little choice but to overtake: the trick was to do so safely. What passes as “safe” on mountain roads in China would terrify most Western passengers. As driver, I would pull out a little way and look. If the road were clear for a decent distance, you pass. But the usual story is that you cannot see because there is a bend, or someone is coming the other way. It might be a slowly-descending truck, so you could actually pop out, overtake, then pop back in before the oncoming truck gets too close.

## Outings to the Mountains

More often though, other people would pass me and the truck in front, come-what-may. If there was a long stream of traffic in front doing this, you could be assured that you could join in the merry chase. Often, however, I followed the truck at 10 kph because I was simply too scared of what was going on. One of my most common comments was something like: “Brave, brave Suzuki driver!” as a car popped out, overtook, then scampered in, just in time to avoid a very fast oncoming bus. What particularly bothered me was the possibility of some heavy vehicle coming towards me on my side of the road, and me with nowhere to go. I kept to the right, kept my speed down, and kept my eyes wide open.

Often there were crashes. I refuse to call them “accidents” because they were so common and so predictably the result of lunatic driving. Often they seemed to involve buses, frequently in head-on collisions with other buses, trucks or cars. Though I had a first-aid certificate and a kit in the glove compartment, I could never face the reality of stopping at one of these scenes. And the scenes were common – there was usually some sort of crash every time I went into the mountains, sometimes several.

The initial thirty kilometres into the mountains were through a sort of industrial nightmare. Here and there were small coal mines, some discharging their production into trucks right beside the road. This coal was used to fire a cement works, common enough in so many places. Little tractors hauled huge loads of limestone along the road, maybe at twenty kilometres per hour. The load was in a trailer towed behind, with the stone blocks interlocked so they would not fall off. Given the bumpy road and the bumpy trailer, of course some rocks did fall off, creating yet another little hazard for vehicles. These little hazards were usually about a foot in diameter.

We passed the cement works. This itself was an imposing concrete structure of eight or ten levels, with several tall chimneys belching dense clouds of fly-ash. The factory appeared window-pane free (there were big holes) and was covered everywhere with a layer of precipitated fly-ash, in places a couple of metres deep. Similarly, the adjacent workers’ dormitories and village were inundated in ash, which spread throughout the valley. Not a tree was to be seen, nor could we see anything else either, as the sky was blotted out by the smoke.

Beyond the cement works, things got better. They couldn’t get much worse. Even so, there were several more mine-sites as we travelled up the valley, where the waste was simply tipped into the river and forgotten. The presence of heavy metals, or the silting of the river, would not be an issue in this or any other river in China. Everywhere, trucks and tractors carrying loads of coal, limestone or other materials charged erratically onto, over and along the road.

We passed through the small town of Yingxiu and over a bridge, encountering a police officer on the other side. I was stopped and my driver’s license, insurance and registration were demanded. Everything was handed over and shortly we were on our way again. Yingxiu is quite an ordinary little town, but it is the last stop of any significance for quite a way. From there, the river

## Outings to the Mountains

valley straightened and so too did the road, allowing the vehicle to cruise along at 80 or 90 kph. Plenty of other vehicles overtook us, lots of them taxis, but also buses and quite heavy trucks.



**Fourth year English major students by the Min River near Wenchuan with typical mountains.**

Either side of the road were magnificent mountains. The peaks are up to 4000 metres, maybe more, and on the ridges we could see pine forest, houses and fields. This seemed eccentric to say the least. There were few or no roads accessing these settlements, so how on earth did the people get there? Who were they?

Gradually, the sky became bluer. There were still occasional industrial facilities, particularly cement works and smelters, which dirtied up the air, but as they became sparser, the sky became clearer. At a bend in the river, we came to a view of a small but concretey town around the corner. This was Wenchuan. We stopped, had a break and took in the view.



**80 year-old Qiang women in traditional costume**

At Wenchuan, we took a short break, looking around the town and particularly the fruit and vegetable markets before continuing. Some of the students insisted that we would be able to get vegetables from the farmers when we stopped for the night, but of this I was sceptical. In any case, I did not want to impose on them. Eggs, tomatoes, cucumber, eggplant and the like are dirt cheap in China: two or three dollars would buy enough to feed all seven of us.



## Outings to the Mountains

From Wenchuan, we turned left, now following the Min River to the west. The road passed through some villages constructed of dry-stonewalling, with flat roofs and eucalyptus trees for shade. Many of the women in these villages wore traditional costumes of various shades of blue and we stopped to look and to meet the people. They were Qiang, a mountain people who had fled here from Xinjiang about a thousand years ago and settled in the rugged river valleys of West Sichuan. They were exceptionally friendly and wanted to be photographed.



**Qiang dry stonewalled village**

For the next thirty kilometres, we drove up the valley, looking for the turnoff to Shang Meng of which Andrew had spoken. He told me that there was an active and welcoming Tibetan community there. The problem proved to be in finding a sign. It was, however, getting dull and soon it would be dark. We needed to find a place where we could park, pitch a tent and cook with a modicum of privacy.

The big difficulty was that on one side there was mountain, and on the other side was river. A narrow strip of fields ran between the road and mountain, and also between the road and the river. Mostly they were planted with crops and in any case, we would be only a couple of metres from the road which carried a fair amount of traffic.



Shortly we came to a suspension bridge, with space to park on the road side, and space to camp on the opposite bank. We stopped and investigated. The bridge was in reasonable condition, so we felt safe enough walking over, and on the other side there were several uncultivated patches under trees and a farmhouse nearby. The girls went off to ask if we could camp there.

Perhaps predictably, the elderly lady who was the mother of the farmer was quite happy to have some visitors camping in a (very little) field, and so too was her son. The fee was 30 RMB.



## Outings to the Mountains

The two tents were soon pitched and everyone (except me) was chopping, frying, stirring and otherwise preparing a meal. There was only one little glitch. Here were we, all out camping for the first time, and the kids were putting together an eight-course meal. No amount of gentle cajoling would persuade them to stop, so it took a couple of hours before the meal was ready. One cutting board, one knife, one table and one bowl are not enough to get eight courses together. Nevertheless, it was all done before it got too dark and we sat and ate our meal in a tiny fraction of the time it took to prepare.



**Flat-roofed farmhouse**

The next morning, we started the day by exploring the river as washing venue. The farmer had warned us not to drink the water, pointing out that the public toilet of the next town upstream discharged directly into it. It was quite cold, being early spring and 1400m altitude, so I admired the way the girls went down and patiently washed not just their faces, but quite a lot more, in the crispy cold water of the Min River. We also explored the farmhouse, with its room devoted to smoking bacon, not to speak of the toilet. I supposed the girls might have been a bit squeamish about using the latter, but that was far from the case. Chinese girls are accustomed to toilets as bad as any you can imagine.



**typical rural toilet**

Apart from the toilets, there was something of a fancy-dress show, with the villagers decking us out in traditional wedding costume and then posing for photos. I was caught with Maggie (not her real name) whom I rather fancied. After fancying ourselves getting





## Outings to the Mountains

married in a Qiang ceremony sometime, we did some exploration of the local sights. The farmer told of a nearby “mini Potala Palace”, actually a Qiang village built the mountainside a couple of kilometres further up the valley. We resolved to visit that first, then go off on our search for Shang Meng.

The Mini Potala was on the opposite side of the river from the river and we were faced with a bit of a parking difficulty. Rather than tell us to go somewhere else, the people who lived by the footbridge insisted that we use their yard to park. In fact, parking was seldom a problem in China, though it is rare that it is free. In this case, there was no expectation of payment.

The group crossed a swing bridge, similar to the one used to access the campsite the night before. On the other side were apple orchards, with neat rows of vegetables grown between the trees: aubergines, tomatoes, lettuce and chinese cabbage were particularly popular, though there were plenty of others. Additionally, there was maize and sometimes potatoes. Rice was not on the menu. Women in traditional blue Qiang dress were scattered through the orchards, stopping their work to stare and maybe wave as our group passed by. Fair-haired visitors are rare here, though there must be the occasional hardy foreign cyclist who makes his way up this valley.



**Qiang women sorting some fabric**

The Mini-Potala is quite impressive as a village and the group of us wandered around, climbing right through and emerging in terraced fields above. There was no pretence here: the paths were gravelly and occasionally muddy, the houses having a feeling of neglect and are a little grubby. So, too, were the inhabitants, maybe not a surprise as there was limited piped water or sanitation and it had been that way for a thousand years.

The buildings were all constructed of stone, with flat roofs, timber joinery and often dirt floors. Concrete was occasionally in evidence, but mostly used in moderation. Some quite striking wooden balconies hung over our path, affording the occupants a superior view of the mountains, the valley and whosoever was coming up from below. In many ways, the people here are



## Outings to the Mountains

blessed, with sun, with stunning mountains, the produce of their fields and a striking culture over a thousand years old.



**The Mini-Potala Palace in West Sichuan**

As we climbed, we came to a small boy, busy with his homework, even though it was Sunday. Tomorrow he would be in class, and today he was learning Chinese characters. One of the girls stopped to give him a hand, quite useful because his grandmother could not be of much assistance. The Qiang have their own language and the elderly probably could not read, write or speak Chinese.



**A glimpse down at the valley**

After climbing above the village, to admire the view over the rooftops and down the valley, we returned to the car and continued on our exploration of the valley. Some thirty kilometres further up the valley was the town of Miyaluo, famed for its autumn leaves, but our journey was in the spring. It was not, however, until nearly 3pm that we arrived at a sign telling us that we

## Outings to the Mountains

had reached Miyaluo. As it was about 300km back to Chengdu and would be dark at 9pm, we could not hang around for long.

Nevertheless, this was the first sighting of Tibetan culture, not only for me but for my students. Prayer flags and a little stupa (locally known as a “chörten”) marked the entry to the town. Nearby was a Tibetan campground, labelled as such in English as well as Tibetan and Chinese. I had one of the girls enquire of the elderly woman seated outside about the overnight fee, to be told that it was 10 yuan. I would bear this in mind for a repeat visit.



**Looking back down the road, past prayer flags and chörten, to Siguniang Shan (6256m) blanketed in clouds**

As I looked back down the road whence we had just come, I could not help but notice a snowy mountain in the distance, shrouded with clouds. Years later, I would learn that this was Siguniang Shan, “Four Sisters Mountain”, with a jagged peak reaching 6256m.



**The Mini-Potala dwellings, and helping a boy with his Chinese characters homework**

The downhill slope for much of the return journey to Chengdu made driving a great deal faster. It did, nevertheless, get dark far from a safe haven, as we

## Outings to the Mountains

were travelling the treacherous mountain road from Yingxiu to Dujiangyan. If daylight driving in China is hazardous, at night it is ridiculous.

Firstly, everyone (except me) drives with his lights on high beam. This means that you are perpetually dazzled, but the logic is that you do this for safety. You need the extra light to see anything, and many things are on the road. Just because it gets dark does not mean that the tractors, trucks, bicycles and pedestrians stop using the road. The traffic continues, with the added complication that everything is black. The pedestrians wear black, probably because any other colour would quickly show the filth that abounds everywhere. The bicycles are black because all bicycles were painted black at the final stages of manufacture. Nor do they (or the pedestrians) have any lights. The only way to see these people is that they are a slightly different shade of black under the illumination of your headlights.

No reflectors and only rarely did any white paint indicate the edge of the road. There was the black of the tarmac, then the black of the void beyond, into which you might plunge for a short drop or a long, long one into the Min River far below. Having headlights turned on high might help resolve these two shades of black. And then there were the tractors. They were slow, unlit vehicles, pattering along with their gross overloads of limestone, rocks or coal, only a little of which dropped off and onto the road to become a hazard. Mostly though, the tractors were a hazard in themselves, especially as they are sometimes parked in the middle of the road, without the benefit of reflectors or lights, in the dark. A crowd of people suddenly hove into illumination by my headlights. All of them were clad in black, loading vegetables onto a truck from a tractor. Neither of the vehicles had the luxury of a light: the trucks usually only have a sole, pathetic, red light, scarcely visible through encrustations of mud which quickly accumulate on such roads. When the vehicle is stationary though, the lights are all turned off, regardless of the dangers posed by having heavy vehicles sitting on a major road in the pitch black. Though I was probably only doing 25kph anyway, I had to brake suddenly and marvel that a crowd of people would labour under such dangerous conditions without the slightest concern for their safety. "Stupid" was the word that I muttered after braking hard and swerving.

The journey from Yingxiu to Dujiangyan is less than 30 kilometres, but in the dark it took rather more than an hour. All the way, I was in dread of coming to an abrupt end, either from driving off the road or else into the back of a large, black, stationary, unlit truck, the likes of which littered the route. Then we came to the bright lights of Dujiangyan and onto the motorway to Chengdu.

As we approached the city, we could not help but notice swirling clouds of smog on the motorway, smell the sulphur dioxide and the disappearance of the moon into the murk. Such atmospheric conditions are considered by most Chinese to be a natural phenomenon. The minority, those who are aware that the fouled air is a result of human activity, believe such pollution to be a necessary accessory to economic advancement.



## Outings to the Mountains



A big weekend out near Wenchuan, Spring 2002



## A Journey to West Sichuan

My trip to the Min Valley on the weekend of April 25<sup>th</sup> showed that Tibetan and Qiang culture was accessible from Chengdu, but too far away for day trips. In particular, I was impressed by the scenery and culture around Miyaluo and thought I should pass through there on my way to more distant places. I studied a road map purchased a few weeks earlier.

One of the difficulties posed by road maps available in China (or Japan for that matter) is that they are very difficult to read. Everything is in Chinese characters and maps in English (or even using the Roman alphabet) are unavailable. You have to learn to read some basic Chinese, at the very least recognising placenames.

There are other problems, too, as I discovered over the coming weeks and years. The most obvious of these is an aversion to showing geographic coordinates on maps, though in all fairness it is not just the Chinese avoid this. Japanese road maps never show your latitude and longitude and my road map of New Zealand has overlooked such a feature. It is useful to have geographic coordinates on a map if you are going to determine your position with a GPS. These instruments do not relate to schemes whereby one axis has A, B, C, ..., X, Y, Z and the other 1, 2, ..., 9, 10 as a coordinate system. Even Professor Zhong's geological maps utilised some crazy spheroid and his knowledge of cartography seemed so poor that he had not the faintest idea what Andrew and I were on about. Consequently, his maps were close to useless to us and we could not find his fault with the GPS. The map below is typical: almost entirely Chinese characters, few distances and not much suggestion that there is a huge mountain range in the middle of it all.



road map for the area west of Chengdu

## A Journey to West Sichuan

Despite these failings, the road atlas I bought showed some major roads passing through the mountains of West Sichuan that I might be able to traverse with my little car. Ideally, I would have a companion. I started by asking my colleagues. They had already set various plans in concrete and were not in a position to go. My students found the whole concept too adventurous, as did my boss, Ms Yang Huidong. In the end, I resolved to do it alone, packing camping equipment and heading out into the wilderness of West Sichuan.

The West Sichuan region was closed to foreigners as recently as the late 1990s, and even in 2002 was considered a bit offbeat and not entirely acceptable. My attitude was (and remains) that as part of its evolution, China has to allow foreigners the same freedom to travel in China as they have in the United States, Canada or Australia. It would seem inconceivable that a foreign (say Chinese) visitor to any English-speaking country would have to approach police stations and get permits to visit local towns or villages. This, however, is a situation that still exists in large swaths of China, particularly in Tibet and Xinjiang. West Sichuan, with its majority Tibetan population, used to be subject to similar restrictions.

May 1<sup>st</sup> is a public holiday in China, it being May Day. By fiddling with timetables and having to work weekends before and after, university staff and students got an entire week off, starting on the evening of April 30<sup>th</sup>. My last class on that date finished at midday. With my car packed, I could expect to get to Miyaluo before the sun went down.

The route taken on the first day was the same as for the student excursion the previous weekend. I did not, however, stop anywhere, except to take a photo of a cement works on the way. This was the last industrial facility, but you can see even from this rather ratty image that you do not need many such establishments to foul up the air and make it difficult to appreciate the glorious mountain scenery. You can bet this factory discharges its waste water and sewage directly into the river, along with any solids such as sinter and ash.



**The last industrial facility on the way to Miyaluo - a cement works**

## A Journey to West Sichuan

By the time I arrived in Miyaluo, the sky had cleared and the great views were available that I had sensed the week before. I arrived at the campground and knocked at the front door, to be welcomed by the elderly lady proprietor. She was happy to accept my 10 RMB payment and I went to select a campsite.

You would think that on a holiday weekend that the nearest campground to a city of 11 million would have been crowded out. In fact, I was the only vehicle there and the camping facilities (concrete under fruit trees) were vacant apart from me. I pulled into a suitable site, then pitched my spacious blue tent. Some men came out to watch. Quite a lot of men, all of them friendly, suggesting by gesticulation that I should camp with them in an adjacent building. I went over and looked inside. There must have been about fifty men, all set up on the concrete floor with their mattresses, bedding, clothing and possessions all in a jumble. None of them looked as though they had had the benefit of a wash or shave for quite some time.

The men wanted me to come in and share with them. From the appearance of their bedding, clothing and general frowziness, I thought I would very likely catch lice if I did so. But they were friendly, almost excessively friendly, fifty of them, all cuddled up in what was virtually one huge bed. I also wondered what sort of sexual activity might be happening after lights-out. I returned to my van, pulled out the picnic table I had just bought and set up my gas cooker. It had been quite a long drive, was almost nine in the evening and I was tired. After preparing a meal I would go to bed.

As I was standing in front of my stove, stirring my meal in a wok, I became aware of people away in the shadows. Looking up, I found that I was surrounded by uniformed police. Altogether, there were five, one of them a woman. Presumably, they wanted to see my documents, particularly a passport and visa. I put down my spatula, gesticulated to them and was about to go and fetch them, only to have the police indicate that I should contain with my cooking. They did not want to interrupt my meal.



**Big blue tent and little blue Wuling van at Miyaluo**

So I continued cooking, but meanwhile the woman officer had phoned someone, somewhere. While she was speaking, I fetched my documents: driver's license, passport, vehicle registration, foreign expert's certificate, residence permit and so on. These are all things you are supposed to have with you as a foreign resident in China. She and the superintendent looked at these closely and could see that all was in order. I supposed that they had not had any previous experience of foreigners driving cars and travelling alone through the countryside. The woman continued on the phone, then indicated that she wanted me to speak to the person on the other end.

A telephone interpreter was on the other end. She informed me that the police wanted me to go and stay at a hotel, on the grounds that camping in China was extremely dangerous.

The police would say that. One of the reasons they want you to stay at a hotel is that the police force often owns hotels and wants them full of paying guests. Furthermore, they particularly like foreign guests because they can be charged premium rates. One reason I wanted to camp was to avoid being slugged as much as a hundred dollars per night for a room when I could camp for two (or free). Another reason was that staying in fancy, polished granite hotels is not really an authentic China experience. Getting out into the villages and catching lice from the locals is more genuine. But I did not want the police to think I was being cheap, and indeed I was not.

"I have spent a great deal of money on buying a car and equipment so that I can camp. I have travelled in many countries and camped with lions and bears, so I do not think I will have any problem here. Besides, the sign for the campground is also in English, so they must be expecting foreign guests. The only danger I can see is the police." I gave the phone back to the woman, who listened to what the interpreter had to say. She then explained to the other police officers what I had just said, they all smiled and said sorry and wished me good luck and to be careful, all five squeezed into their tiny Suzuki Alto car, then disappeared into the dark. Shortly, I went to bed and had a fitful night's sleep. The new air mattress I had bought was not particularly comfortable.

The following morning, I woke to the sound of some sort of clinking of rocks on the mountainside above. When I looked to see what was going on, I could see that the 50-odd men I had met the night before were actually working to improve the slope stability of the mountain looming over the campground. Maybe camping in China *is* very dangerous: rocks might fall on you! But I had carefully avoided setting up camp at the foot of the mountain.

Under the watchful eyes of some local children, I had breakfast. They were presumably unaccustomed to seeing people prepare a plunger of coffee and then consuming muesli with milk, followed by a three-egg omelette. My breakfast was prepared on a natty little folding table using a gas cooker, possibly also not the sort of arrangement the locals carried in the back of their

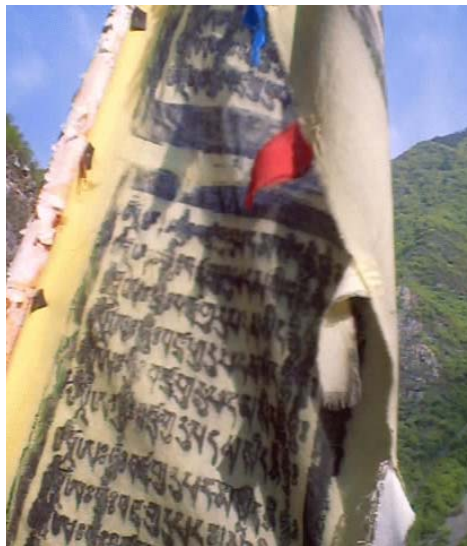


cars. I then packed everything into the van and headed out to see what the day might bring.

Of course, when I had arrived at Miyaluo, it was quite late, not much remained of the day and I was anxious to pitch my tent before it got completely black. Despite the good intentions of the police, I had not explored the place further. In broad daylight, there was a town with several hotels and restaurants. I had had some trouble with the gas cooker the night before, so I went to the gas shop to see what was wrong. Nothing. Silly me. You just have to push the knob in before clicking it to start.

What I could not help but notice was that the streets were all dug up. The town was putting in underground power. This is a good idea, especially when you consider the ugliness of so many small towns in Japan. There, towns in otherwise very attractive locations are wrecked by a tangle of wire, poles, transformers and lights extending up to 25 metres into the air. This is one of several things where the Chinese could teach the Japanese a thing or two (later visits to the town confirmed that quite attractive street lighting would be the only evidence of underground electrification).

The town itself, however, offered little for the sightseer, so I drove out to continue my journey up the valley, but not for long. Around the bend just out of town was a bridge, a turnoff into a Tibetan settlement. I stopped on the bridge, a modern concrete structure but adorned with prayer flags. These were the first I had ever seen. Not one, but at least a dozen poles, each five or six metres high, was adorned with brightly-coloured flags.



**Above: bridge with Tibetan prayer flags  
Left: detail of prayer flag**

Later I was to find prayer flags wherever there were Tibetans, in huge numbers beyond what any person could dream possible.

I continued over the bridge and up a steep dirt track, to see what else I could find. Already there was evidence of excessive, ostentatious housing. Occasional large red-tiled, stone houses had been visible on either side as I

## A Journey to West Sichuan

had approached Miyaluo and now there were many. I stopped and walked through the village.



**Typical three-storied village house with prayer flags and satellite dish**

A farm tractor, towing a trailer filled with people, came down the track towards me. The group in the back waved cheerily and shouted “Hello.” The girls were dressed in extravagant costume, far too much really for a day in the fields. I continued up the rough track, coming to a system of hot water pipes and the village bathhouse. I really needed a bath, but was thwarted by the queue of locals outside. Furthermore, I was a bit shy about running about taking photos of people waiting for the facility, so this is all you get.



**Local women waiting outside the bathhouse – the water is from local hot springs**



After wandering about in the village, I returned to the car and drove north through a narrow gorge. There I encountered some Tibetan religious art, somewhat reminiscent of Aboriginal art for some reason. It was affixed to the rounded granite boulders using modern brightly-coloured paints. Another modern aspect was the levy of a fee, though quite modest at 3 yuan.



The fee entitled me to look at the art and also admire the adjacent waterfall, not very high but extremely busy with coping with the waters of the Min River passing through a very narrow gap. One disappointment was the considerable amount of rubbish floating in the whirlpool downstream of the falls – lots of rubbish, much of it disposable slippers from some fancy hotel. Why would anyone in their right mind despoil the very attraction on which the hotel depends?

A few kilometres further, and I found the hotel. It was a large, concrete structure, straddling the river, finished in a faux-Tibetan style: doodahs and gargoyles everywhere, but still essentially Chinese underneath. A long line of copper prayer-wheels stretched along the entry-way to the hotel. No-one was to be seen. Where were all the holiday-makers on this May Day weekend?



Swish "Tibetan" hotel at Miyaluo

In fact, the buildings looked about 10% Tibetan and 90% Chinese. Had the architect looked closely at real Tibetan buildings and tried to emulate them, he might not have ended up with the bowdlerised mess above.

Miyaluo is surrounded by forest and huge, snowy mountains. Much of the town itself is quite ugly and whatever peace there could be is ruined by the constant stream of trucks and buses through the main street. Their drivers have very loud air horns fitted and use them liberally, again doing their best to make a wonderful tourist locality totally inhospitable. As soon as was practicable, I fled the town and headed up the nearby valley. There, the traffic was less noisy and I could appreciate the views.

## A Journey to West Sichuan



**Miyaluo snuggled in a bed in the river, surrounded by forest and snowy mountains**

The valley widened in places, and there were farms with many delightful and interesting houses. It seems hard to credit that houses with such size, style and in such an amazing landscape lack facilities like running water and flush toilets.



Being spring, the fields had been ploughed and seeded, but as yet there was no green growth. The buildings, however, were a huge contrast to the brutal concrete ugliness that characterised Chengdu or even the smaller Chinese towns. They were also a testament to the difference between China and the Tibetans, who proudly display their identity in their marvellous architecture.

## A Journey to West Sichuan

And these were just the homes of ordinary farmers. None of them were hovels, none used the white tiles and concrete which are the dominant architectural paradigm of Communist China.

Further north, the bitumen ran out and the road became steeper. This was something of a surprise, as it was Highway 213 and marked as one of the principal access highways from Chengdu to Tibet. Maybe I had made a mistake. But no, the route was shown with the same wide, red line that snaked up the valley from Dujiangyan to Yingxiu, Wenchuan and then Miyaluo. There was not much traffic, so maybe there was a reason. Distressed by the sudden rough road where up to now there had been bitumen (albeit with potholes in some sections) I became a little depressed. The car filled full of dust.



**On the rough dirt road north of Miyaluo**

In front of me was an endless wall of mountainside. A couple of hours later, it seemed no better, but when I stopped and looked back at the view, I became more appreciative of where I was. All around were staggering, snow-capped mountains, forests and rushing streams.

The relentless climb continued, until I came to a road junction. If I continued straight ahead, it was the way to Aba, a town in the far north of Sichuan near the border with Qinghai Province. Though attractive, there was no circular route that way: I would have to come back the same way. The other way led to a circle route back to Chengdu via Kangding. I had arranged to meet Mary and her mother there the following weekend.

Two teenage children were waiting on the corner. They were presumably going home to the countryside from a nearby high school, but were waiting for a lift towards Aba, so I had to pass them by.

Forever upward, forever rough dirt road. The map showed nothing of this, and I had expected a route following valleys, not such mountains. The road was carved into the side of the mountain for dozens of kilometres and I could now appreciate a stupendous view. Far below was the Miyaluo Valley, with the town hidden somewhere. Now I was up at the level of the snowy peaks and forest, perched like an eagle on a rock shelf looking out on the magnificent spectacle.



## A Journey to West Sichuan



**Looking down towards Miyaluo**

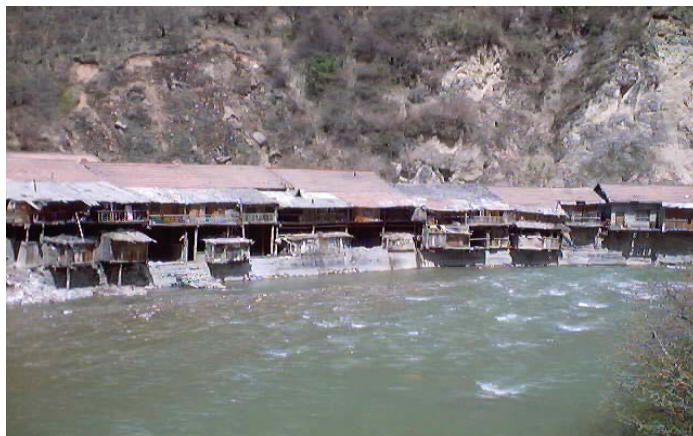


**The road driven was this scar on the mountainside**

Very soon, I was at a pass. This had not been marked on the map and for me was a total surprise. I fished out my GPS, set it up in an open area, and waited. Being an old machine (1994), it took its time, but when it came up with the answer, I was astonished. I was at an altitude of 4244 metres, a height I had some difficulty believing. You would think it would be plotted on a map and the height annotated. All the road map showed was an unremarkable straight line where there had actually been many kilometres of tortuous zig-zag climb.

On the other side was an equally dramatic descent. As I slowly and carefully followed this road, I encountered two things. The first of these was a yak. Until that moment, I had never seen one of these beasts – horned, long-haired cattle, much loved by the Tibetans and one of the hallmarks of their civilisation. The other was someone looking for a lift on the side of the road. At least, that is what I supposed he was after, and he accepted a ride. But in hindsight, I believe he was trying to interest me in the “caterpillar fungus” common in the area and revered as a folk cure for all manner of ailments. In any case, he jumped into the vehicle, rode with me some kilometres and equally abruptly, was gone.

Down in the valley below, I saw a town. As I entered, suddenly there was Chinese writing everywhere and no Tibetans to be seen. You can easily tell who is Tibetan by his/her clothing. The Tibetans wear Tibetan clothing,



**Latrines hanging over the river**

## A Journey to West Sichuan

while the Chinese wear functional, plain, ugly blue Western gear. The houses were ugly concrete, the roofs were of corrugated iron and out the back, the latrines hung out over the river.

This town was not what I was looking for. Somewhere out there in the countryside was a place I could stop at a grassy patch by a stream, erect my tent and cook my dinner. Given the reception given by the police the night before, I thought the best thing to do would be to navigate up a little sidetrack somewhere and camp out of sight of the Boys in Blue. I followed the river for quite a way, observing a parallel dirt road on the opposite bank. Occasional valleys had even more obscure dirt tracks leading up them. At the first opportunity, I crossed the river and drove along the dirt road, through watersplashes over streams, then left up a little valley. This looked terrific except for one problem: there was not any convenient flat land, not for few kilometres anyway.

The valley widened a bit and some fields, tiny fields, were between me and the stream. The downside to this was that there was a village a few hundred metres away. Though the field was not in cultivation, it seemed appropriate to find someone in authority in the village and obtain some sort of consent to camping on the ground. Otherwise they could call the police and I would have the same sort of problems as the night before, except maybe worse. I drove into the village.



**Rural village near campsite**

It was a scene of general shabbiness, rusted corrugated iron, rubbish here and there, quite a few satellite TV dishes, timber framing in dereliction, people banging and clattering inside buildings, but no-one of any apparent authority. I went and knocked on a door, to be met by an astonished, wide-eyed middle-aged woman. With my negligible Chinese and a certain amount of waving and charades, I gave her some sort of impression. She shrieked, ran off and called someone else and soon enough an elderly man turned up. Speaking to him in English and continuing the charades, he seemed to get the idea. I walked with him back to my proposed campsite, he nodded in assent and soon enough I had my tent up. It was not without a crowd of onlookers, however, some of them women, but mostly children, and of course the old man.



## A Journey to West Sichuan

The village was not Tibetan, but Han. Everyone wore the blue uniform: jacket, trousers, shirt and caps, that typify the Cultural Revolution. They all spoke Chinese, looked Chinese and did not live in the grandiose houses which I had already recognised as a characteristic of the Tibetans. It was a village of simple, poor, Chinese peasants.

As the light dimmed, I cooked my meal in front of the crowd, as usual entranced by the sight of a gas stove, folding picnic table and a range of vegetables and eggs. The children were particularly nosey, the old man seated and keeping an eye on them. Some of the kids' mothers were there and a couple of young men, but not a soul spoke a word of English and me not much Chinese, so it was mostly a case of quietly looking. Sticks were gathered from nearby and a fire started, so we spent the evening sitting around and watching the flames licking the wood, the glowing charcoal and finally just a pile of glimmering ashes. The old man, seeing my yawns, issued a quiet command to the children and soon they were gone, traipsing back to the village.

In the morning it was icy, with frost on the roof of the car, on the windscreen and on the tent. Though it was the second of May and spring, it was still pretty chilly here at nearly four thousand metres. I wondered what crop would be planted later in this little patch of dirt. Would it be maize?

My route for the day would take me through a Chinese town Ma-Er-Kang (Tibetan: Barkam), then on another eight kilometres to a Tibetan one. It was the latter that I planned to visit, not having any particular interest in the modern settlements in the valley.

Arriving at the Tibetan town, I found an arrow pointing to a parking area on the other side of the river. There were quite a few cars there, mostly with Chengdu plates. As I thought I had used the most direct route from Chengdu, this came as something of a surprise. Revisiting the map showed no way to get there apart from what seemed to be a goat track up a nearby valley. Maybe the goat trail was more substantial than the recently-published local road atlas indicated.

As I parked my car, I was approached by a young lady in traditional Tibetan costume. To my surprise, she spoke quite passable English, and wanted to know where I had come from, what nationality I was, where I worked and many other things. She would show me around the town.



Frankly, I was a bit sceptical. Was this some sort of scam? At the bare minimum, I expected I would pay some sort of guide fee for her services and thought it best to sort this out at the beginning rather than have a disagreement at the end. I

## A Journey to West Sichuan

asked about tickets: yes, there were tickets, and they were quite modestly priced, at ten yuan. I asked her if I had to pay for her services. No.

She took me through the village, to the shops, to the meeting places and to the temple. We went along narrow alleyways, to the attentive stares of curious children and curious adults. In the temple, a Buddhist monk took a few yuan from me, hung a long, white scarf around my neck, and chanted a prayer. All the while, this quite pretty young girl, only nineteen years old, trailed around, talking to me.



The girl was not Tibetan, but Chinese and dressed up as a Tibetan. Her job was to guide tourists, mostly Chinese day-trippers from Chengdu, through the town. She had completed high school and wanted to go to university, but just for now just was working as a tour guide. She wanted to study English and was not particularly happy in this little town out in the mountains and wanted to return to the big city, to Chengdu, where life was more familiar.

An elderly wooden building boasted windows decorated with lattice-work, over which were large, white external curtains, decorated with various motifs. The most common of these were a

curious rhomboidal mandala, another was a deer or elk of some sort. This was all a bit strange, not what I had expected at all, but striking in its simple use of earthy finishes with its



occasional flashes of colour. In this respect, it was reminiscent of Japanese architecture.

The town itself was quite fabulous, with a jumble of multi-storied stone buildings, with tiled roofs. The stone was sandstone of all different colours, cleaved into blocks of all sizes, little blocks, big blocks and everything inbetween. At the corners, the masonry was upturned, probably a feature designed to thwart earthquakes. Small timber casement windows had a massive wooden lintel all decorated with a checkerboard of white and colour. Up close, it was a marvel to behold. From a distance too, it was quite striking, with some of the largest buildings clustered around a plaza. There seemed to be only only little catch to all of this. Many of the most imposing buildings were new, still under construction in some cases. Was the original town not enough?

The guided tour must have lasted an hour. She introduced me to some of her work colleagues, all of them Chinese girls in Tibetan costume.

As we parted, she gave me her address, email and mobile number, and asked me to make a return visit.

And she would not take any money for her time and services. I suppose a Western man who turns up at a place like this, in his own car, must seem an attractive proposition, even if he is fifty-something and she is nineteen.



I never did contact her. Such approaches by young girls became so commonplace in my life that I treated them with some suspicion.

With the Tibetan village tour over, I turned and made my way back to Ma Er Kang, the Chinese town. There I sought out a few things I needed most: petrol, a meal and a toilet.

As was the case with Miyaluo, Ma Er Kang was having its streets refurbished. Again, the power was being undergrounded and again there were trenches and dirt everywhere. This made it a bit of a problem to park, though mercifully there were very few vehicles. The petrol station was the plain Chinese concrete variety and as I filled up, I asked about a toilet. “Cesuo ma?” “Mei you.” But then he pointed to a building, shall I say a structure, on the other side of the street. That was the nearest toilet. I felt a need, so I went over to have a look with some trepidation.



**multiple-occupancy latrine  
with a view**



It was of rather open construction, a lattice-work of bricks so you could see everything that was going on as you squatted.



**Street markets in Barkam**

The town itself had no redeeming features, its architecture being the usual concrete which you find anywhere in China. But it did have a restaurant and I ventured down a side street to find someplace to eat. One difficulty is that I do not speak Chinese, another is that I do not eat meat. “Wo bu shi ro” I told the woman as I went in. The usual gesticulations went on, some noodles were put in a wok and stirred with vegetables and shortly I had a bowl of noodles, vegies and some egg. It all seemed a bit bland and I could do better Chinese food myself. They probably though my tastes in food bizarre, what not having salt, meat or chilli.

One difficulty was that I had run out of provisions and had to stop and get some. For this, I simply had to wander down the street: there were stalls everywhere, selling eggs, fruit, vegetables, mushrooms and in a special section, great slabs of yak and sheep. I picked out a few of what I wanted and was doubtless overcharged.

From Ma Er Kang, I headed east, again along the main Highway 213, the arterial road to Lhasa. For a while, it was sealed and progress was more than adequate. The valley was deep and beautiful, with a swiftly-flowing river overshadowed by huge mountains. And overshadowed it



was, as with the late afternoon, the sun was sinking in the sky and behind the peaks. I arrived at a major river junction, to find a temple right at the confluence. Rather than having an internal space with a large Buddha, monks, incense and hanging cloth, this one was basically a large stupa surrounded by an arcade of prayer wheels. Behind it was a carpark. I drove in, got out and looked at the river. All around were tall poles, over eight metres high, with prayer flags attached all the way down. As I checked out the prayer flags, a truck drove in. It was driven around the temple, clockwise, three times, then disappeared as mysteriously as it came. As he went, I could see quite a crowd of women in the back, who immediately shouted out “Hello” and waved furiously. Nice to be such a hit with the ladies.

Then I wandered over to the temple and admired the prayer wheels, genuine prayer wheels, not the glossy imitations I had seen a few days earlier in Miyaluo.

Prayer wheels are inscribed with Buddhist sutras, the theory being that by spinning the wheel, you have the wheel saying the prayer for you. With long lines of prayer wheels right around the temple, a devotee can set several hundred wheels into motion, resulting in a great deal of sutras being muttered and a lot of karma being generated for your future life. In order to utter the sutras in the correct order, the faithful have to circumambulate the temple clockwise. Driving a truck around three times, clockwise, probably is a quick and dirty solution. It did not sit as well though as my single trip around, spinning each and every wheel as I went.

I returned to the car and headed off again to the east, following the truck which by this time was some distance away. It was, however, quite a slow truck, as trucks usually are in China. Soon I was trailing close behind and the ladies in the back, a dozen or more of them, started waving, smiling but not blowing kisses. All were in traditional costume and most were middle-aged. Being middle-aged did not seem to stop them being a bit frisky.



## A Journey to West Sichuan

Some kilometres later, a village hove into view on the left, the other side of a bridge over the river. The truck came to a halt, I supposed to disembark the passengers in the rear, but no. The ladies all waved towards the village and indicated that I should follow. Is this what I wanted to do? What the hell! The truck then turned left and started to cross, while I hesitated. Follow them, or continue on my way? The eminently sensible thing seemed to be to follow, at some risk to my personal safety. The ladies all waved for me to come. When I did, there was a cheer and the girls were ecstatic.



**Friendly village about 80km west of Barkam**

Upon arrival at the other side, it was plain there was quite a large village with hundreds of people and many, many buildings, all surrounded by fields, but where was I going to stay? I stopped in a dusty, stony area, surrounded by substantial houses. Quite a crowd of children appeared from the woodwork, all standing around and looking. A young man came out, approached me and asked me what I wanted. I explained that the women in the truck had indicated for me to follow them, and now here I was. What I needed was somewhere to camp.

It has to be said that in all honesty, his spoken English was poor and his listening comprehension was as well, so I was repeating myself again and again and I was sure the message was not getting through. One problem with camping would be the children. There were many of them, all quite curious and I was sure they would be a pest. I mean, they were sweet, but fifty children constantly standing around, looking, talking, poking at things, for several hours, was likely to send me crazy. I was taken to see the temple and also the school, but my questions about where to camp remained unanswered. “Ignored” is probably a better word for it.

The boy insisted on showing me around the village, to the temple, the prayer wheels, the school and finally to his mother’s home. She was the village “barefoot doctor”, whose surgery consisted of a dingy little office with a limited range of medications and first-aid supplies. It was in their home that I was to spend the night.



## A Journey to West Sichuan

During the evening, we sat around watching television. As I had brought a video camera with me, I entertained them with video of the scenery I had seen on the way from Chengdu. I regretted that I had not thought to bring video of other places, of Australia and Japan.

That the family had a large colour television set should come as no surprise. China has a number of communications satellites and even here, deep in the mountain valleys of West Sichuan, anyone with a satellite dish and receiver can get China Central Television. A dish plus receiver costs about \$100 and it was a similar price for a colour TV. As the programming was all in Chinese, it was of no particular interest to me. I asked the young man about his attitude to China as a Tibetan, to be immediately informed that “Tibet has always been part of the Chinese motherland.” It sounded like a phrase he had been taught at school. One of my students had told me a few weeks earlier that the Dalai Lama had been “a cruel dictator”. Communist China does not encourage independent thought or discussion about the Tibet issue.



**The young man with his sister and her child**

The living room was quite spacious, with a couple of sofas, the television, a few posters as decoration, and a rough-sawn wooden floor which had been sanded to make it more comfortable. It was in here that I would spend the night. I brought in my air mattress, inflated it and was left in peace.



The following day, I was treated to a tour of the fields, then a walk up the hillside to get a more commanding view of the village. The valley floor was a patchwork of small fields, sown to barley or else vegetables. A water wheel powered another prayer wheel, completely automating the process of acquiring good karma for the next life. It was an altogether idyllic setting in which to live,



## A Journey to West Sichuan

even if the people lacked cash income. Nevertheless, they did have material comforts such as the colour television and a village truck in which they could go on shopping excursions to Barkam.

Back in the village, a group of women were sitting on a balcony in the sun. They waved for me to come and join them, an offer accepted, as was a cup of tea and some cakes. All around the village, one thing struck me: there were very few men. What had happened to them?



**On the balcony for morning tea**

I bade the village goodbye. It became exceptionally clear that they wanted me to stay for much longer, but I had a job in Chengdu, only a few days' break, and a long way to go before I was back in the city.

For the next couple of days, I found that my chosen route was suffering from "roadworks". Of this I had been warned by Andrew before leaving Chengdu, but for me, "roadworks" meant nothing in particular. In Western Australia, you are occasionally held up for a few minutes while something is being done, but after a few minutes or a few kilometres, the problem is dealt with.

Highway 213 was shown on the map as being a major route to Tibet, but the reality was rather different. It became a pair of wheel ruts along the valley floor, sometimes with little separating it from a mountain on one side and the river on the other. I came to where something was holding us up and had to pull off to the side for half an hour. A loud bang, flying rocks and a large cloud of dust obscured the way a hundred or so metres away, we waited and a loader cleared some of the rubble off the



**getting a truck through a rocky patch**

## A Journey to West Sichuan

road. Then we were on our way again.

Another obstacle soon appeared. A truck was stuck, caught by rocks as it had tried to negotiate a narrow path through the works. A group of men and women crowded round, trying to extract it from the mess and allow other traffic to pass, including me. Again, there was more delay.

These delays became ever more frequent as the roadworks intensified. Thousands of labourers, equipped with little more than a shovel and a cane basket, were widening the route of National Highway 213. Basically, they were chipping away at the mountain on one side, putting a load in a small basket, then walking to the other and throwing this tiny amount of spoil down the slope to the river. Given enough people, shovels, baskets and months, you can build roads through mountains this way. Many of the labourers were young women, dressed in traditional costume and quite a few of them wearing jewellery. For this work, they were paid about two dollars per day.



**young women labouring on Highway 214**

All along the way, the workers stopped, stared and shouted out the only word of English they knew: “Hello!” For a while I would respond similarly, but there is a finite limit to how many “hellos” one can shout out in a day. I would wave, they waved back. Never have I felt so welcome by people anywhere. At the time I felt a bit shy about taking photographs and got this one snap of the workers. I am sure that if I had stopped and asked them, they would have all lined up, shovels in hand, and willingly been photographed.

This also explained why there were no men and few single girls in the village where I had stayed overnight. They were all out, earning cash income on the roadworks or similar. Being too far to commute back to the village each night, they camped in crude tents near their work, meals prepared under rough conditions, and sanitation was virtually non-existent.



**road workers' accommodation**

After battling some dozens of kilometres through roadworks, without the benefit of a designated detour, flagmen or whatever, I came to a Tibetan Buddhist tower. I parked, went inside and climbed the stairs. Each level was an art gallery, stocked with religious images. Some of them were not what you expect to see in China and were plainly of Indian origin. I was particularly taken with a couple of Indian gods, copulating. Were it that I had a better camera, but here is a blurry image for you. Indeed, there were several of these and you wonder how on earth they had survived the attentions of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. Maybe the road had been too rough or no-one told the Red Guards about them.



**Hindu gods having a jiggy-jig**

A young Chinese couple with nice SLR cameras were also at the tower. They spoke English and asked if I could give them a lift. Of course. They were on their way to visit the largest temple in China, apparently hidden a long way up a valley about a hundred kilometres up the road. Would I be going there?



One of my concerns was with the fuel supply. I carried no extra fuel, so was limited by the capacity of my tank, which was about thirty litres. Having



come a couple of hundred kilometres since I had last filled up, a hundred kilometre journey up a side valley could leave me with an empty tank, far from anyone who could fill it up. Also, there was a question of time. Such a side-trip could easily take a couple of days, days which I did not have to spare. The lift only went as far as the turnoff and I continued along the 214.

That evening, I camped in a thicket of bushes down by the riverside, out of view of nosey police again. It was also far from nosey locals, so I had an evening to myself. As I pitched the tent, it started to snow, but fortunately was limited to this. For a while, I sat by a campfire, but with no-one to entertain quickly became bored and went to bed quite early.

Most of the following day was engaged in the continuing struggle with roadworks. It took all day to cover eighty kilometres, much of the time spent waiting on men with machines or stuck in traffic jams. The local practice for regulating traffic flow under these circumstances was to do absolutely nothing. Traffic in both directions insisted on occupying both sides of the road, so that huge and unnecessary snarls occurred. Fortunately, my vehicle was more narrow than most and I was a more skilled driver. I became adept at squeezing my little van through any gap wider than my rear vision mirrors. I could sneak between heavy trucks or earthmoving equipment, down the shoulder of the road or wherever. Nevertheless, long periods were spent standing around and cursing the idiot minds that created this mess and could not see a better way.

The next day, the endless dirt road and works continued. Nor did a petrol station present itself, even as I arrived in a small, grungy town. I drove around somewhat bewildered, as there were quite a few motorcycles to be seen, but what did they do for fuel? A Chinese woman came up to me, asking if I could give her a lift to the self-same temple as the couple I had encountered the day before. I had to disappoint her that I had just come from the road that led to the turnoff, but my problem now was fuel. She was quite helpful, asked around and found a premises that sold petrol.

I say “premises” because it was in reality a man with a drum by the main intersection, who pumped out petrol into a galvanised watering can. This then decanted into your tank. She asked me how much I wanted. “Twenty litres would do.” I imagined that petrol retailed this way was probably substandard and expensive and I was sure I would be able to fill up in Luhuo, a town some 100 kilometres distant. The fuel was pumped and decanted, with me watching nervously for dirt, water and hoping the crowd of men smoking nearby would not set everything aflame. With this dealt with, I thanked the woman for her assistance and set off on my way, leaving the squalid little town behind.

The route continued with the roadworks unabated but by the mid-afternoon I was in Luhuo. As I approached the town, I was flagged down by a policeman at a boom gate and I went through the usual document presentation palaver. There was no problem, however, and I cruised into town. I could not help but notice that there was a lot of rubbish scattered about and all the streets were being repaved, creating chaos as I found my way around town.

Luhuo is on the junction of the 213 and another major road from Chengdu, and here it truly became the main highway to Tibet. Being the last major town for a long way on that route, I would stop and look around for things Tibetan: some prayer flags, a rug for my room in Chengdu, and maybe some music. In fact, all of these things fell together quite quickly. There were shops that sold prayer flags, shops that sold rugs and plenty of music shops. It was just a matter of going in, selecting what I wanted, and paying. The storekeepers were a bit surprised that I paid whatever they asked: two yuan per metre for prayer flags, two hundred yuan for the rug, and eight yuan each for the Tibetan music CDs.

The town itself was nothing special. With the exception of the Tibetan quarter out to the northeast, in fact it was a study in ugliness, as are most small towns in China. Rubbish was strewn about the streets, often in large piles. Indeed, I quickly observed that wherever there was a large pile of rubbish, you would find a sign in Chinese characters within about twenty metres. I became convinced that the rubbish was not the doing of the Tibetans, but their Chinese intruder cousins. With my car filled with wares, I now headed south, back towards Kangding and Chengdu. I was on the return leg of my journey.



**Two monks top up my tank**

Just at the outskirts of town, I came to a petrol station. Not having seen one for four hundred kilometres and by no means certain where I would find the next, I stopped to refill. The proprietors were two Buddhist monks in regalia. Regrettably, the petrol station was a fairly typical example of Chinese white-tile architecture.

These men were intensely friendly and helpful, as had been everyone else on the journey thus far, the police maybe excepted. They made sure the car was full, shaking it to encourage air bubbles in the tank to come out so they could get an extra litre of petrol in.

Driving south from Luhuo, there was a straight, if narrow and bumpy sealed road for a long way. Two more Buddhist monks were standing by the road and flagged me down. They had mistaken me for a local taxi, as the roads in the area were plied by such vehicles offering lifts in exchange for a modest fare. I picked them up, finding myself for the first time in close contact with these monks. For them, I imagine it was the first time they had had a lift with



a foreign driver. On the way, we stopped at a stupa (“chorten” in Tibetan) and went for a walk around it. I don’t suppose Chinese drivers stop too often to circumambulate a stupa. Then we continued on downhill, finally coming to where they had to get out. A group of people welcomed them, maybe expecting them to officiate at a funeral, christening or wedding. As they alighted, they offered me ten yuan each, which I declined. Maybe that will be good karma for my next sojourn on this planet.

Many, many villages lined the road. The architecture was quite stunning and rather different to the stone-based design that I had seen around Miyaluo. At one of these villages, I had to stop and have a closer look. The houses were constructed of lighter-coloured stone, though often were rendered with mud and probably mud-brick construction. They all had the timber-work of the roofing and fascias highlighted in white. Large piles of firewood doubled as fences, making it difficult for intruders to pass.

Stopping at a village, a group of young Tibetan men were lounging out the front in the sun. Though not in traditional costume, one wore the classic cowboy hat so popular in this area. Also, they all had long-ish hair, a characteristic that sets Tibetans apart from Chinese, who like to have theirs cut very short indeed.



**Young men showing off Tibetan log-cabin architecture**

Later, I came upon one of these houses under construction. I had to stop and have a closer look at what they were doing, as the timbering was quite striking.

It is not often that you see houses being built with unsawn logs from large trees, and these were truly remarkable. It was constructed with very large logs as uprights, seven along and across, each about eight metres long and 600mm in diameter. You could tell that they don’t have a problem with termites, as the timbers were laid directly onto the ground. Whether cutting forests for the construction of such houses is sustainable is another matter. Probably it is not, especially as I saw thousands of such houses under construction during the subsequent years.



**A large Tibetan house under construction**

It started to rain. Being at about 4000 metres, at six in the evening, I became a little concerned that I would be stuck in bleak and snowy conditions for my overnight stay. I was determined to get somewhere lower and warmer. The road obliged, continuing downhill, and then the sun came out. As this happened, I spied some black tents on my left. These have been around earlier, particularly to the east of Luhuo, and here they were again. If there was one place I would be able to camp and not really be noticed by the police, it would be among Tibetan black tents. Noting a crossing through the barbed-wire fence that faced the road, I drove off, over the pasture, through a herd of yak and up to a cluster of these tents.

The black tents are the homes of nomadic yak-herders, who can be seen far and wide, wherever there are Tibetans. The tents themselves are made of yak-hair, can be bought commercially, and require many, many poles for their erection. Classically, they were carted around on pack yaks, but these days are as likely to be relocated using a Dong Feng truck. With the thirty-odd poles, the things must weigh half a ton or more.

A number of people came out to meet me, wondering what I was looking for. Again, gesticulations were the only way, but the usual charades involving tent-pitching and sleeping were utilised. They, being a few men, a woman, some children and a Buddhist monk, seemed happy enough to have me there. When I pulled out the tent, they were entranced. Within ten minutes, I had my tent set up, mattress inside and bedding ready. I am sure it was a lot cosier inside than their black tents (*since this time, dome tents have become quite popular with Tibetan nomads*).

## A Journey to West Sichuan



**Nomadic horseman with yak and black tents in distance**

Then it was time for dinner. I pulled out the gas cooker, folding table and chairs, chopped up some vegetables, whisked up some eggs, boiled some rice and settled down for a meal. This was rather of the nature of Jamie Oliver stuff, with the lady watching with intense curiosity. I guess she was unaccustomed to seeing men cook.

In the evening, I went into their tent, it having (solar) electric light and a stove. The Buddhist monk took a particular shine to me, so much so that I had to wonder about his sexual preferences. He had to sit right next to me, hold my hand and stare into my eyes. Later he seemed interested in joining me in my tent. A bit much really.

In the morning, the men showed off their horsemanship while I packed up. Though the horses were really best called ponies, they carried their riders briskly across the open plain as they whizzed around the herd of yak. The little boys were a bit of a pest, being quite cheeky and intrusive, and putting graffiti on the back window of my car. What it said is anyone's guess. As I prepared coffee, the woman turned up with a container of yak milk. This went well with the coffee and also the muesli. It was still warm and exceptionally creamy, and I might say, a bit yakky. Yak milk, butter and cheese all taste strongly of yak, the last so strong that I cannot stomach it. So it was a pleasant experience and one I would recommend, even the attentions of the Buddhist monk, who was still looking dreamy in the morning. Then I set off for Kangding, where I planned to meet Mary and her mother, and Martha.

The road climbed up over a pass, and on this section was unsealed. It was also still winter here, with snow all about and the altitude about 4000 metres. A woman was herding yak across the road and into the snow on the other side, whistling and whooping to encourage them.





**Woman herding yak across the highway**

At the top of the pass, the road could be seen snaking down through the snow and the valley in the distance. The temple of Tagong was on the left as I descended, surrounded by tour buses and hundreds of women with horses, all a bit too touristy compared to the previous days. I passed it by, crossed another snowy pass and by the early afternoon, was in Kangding. Along the way, I picked up another group of hitchhikers, this time some women from Chengdu, one of whom spoke English. I dropped them all in Kangding, it not being my plan to go any further that day. Somehow they had expected I would give them a ride all the way to Chengdu.



**temple in Kangding**

In the days of an independent Tibet, Kangding was a border trading town. Here the Tibetans brought their wares, probably gold, to exchange for tea and whatever else the Chinese merchants had to offer. These days it is very Chinese, an apparition of concrete medium-rise buildings in what had once been a town constructed of timber. A few old buildings still remain, principally the temple but also some old shops. If you look down on the town from above (as I did on a later visit when I rode the cable-car) it is wall-to-wall concrete.



the few old shops in Kangding

Mary, her mother and Martha were planning to stay at the Black Tent, a Tibetan-style backpackers near the centre of Kangding. I resorted to the trusty Lonely Planet travel guide for a map of the town and after a while, sorted it out. Parking seemed at a bit of a premium, so I parked illegally next to the temple and ducked into the Black Tent. Unsurprisingly, they were not waiting for me at reception, so I browsed through the guest book. This revealed that they had been in Kangding, but only for one night and had checked out a couple of days before. I enquired as to the nightly rate, to be told it was 40 yuan per night for a dormitory room. They could not, however, accommodate the car.

Exploring the town was my first priority, starting with the temple. There were plenty of devotees coming and going, so I joined them, particularly enjoying the huge prayer wheel by the main entry. This was a large drum, two metres high and and and a half metres in diameter, weighing several hundred kilograms and spun on its axis by a group of elderly women. I joined them, then went to watch the faithful lighting incense and everyone bowing and scraping before the Buddha.





## A Journey to West Sichuan

The temple was very peaceful and very Tibetan, but the streets outside lacked such personality. This is something of an understatement really. Though Kangding had only a limited number of vehicles, they were mostly taxis and in constant motion around the town, seeking fares. The standard way of getting the attention of a possible passenger is to honk, so every person walking in the street gets a toot from every taxi that passes by. Consequently, there is a constant clamour of honking taxis, which after the peace and quiet of the mountains was quite a shock. After about half an hour of constantly being tooted, I was ready to leave the town. There was one little issue though.

My email had not been checked for a week, so it was time to wander into an internet café and have a look. I checked out a couple of the places suggested in Lonely Planet, only to find both were crammed to capacity with young men, and the air thick with cigarette smoke. They all seemed to be playing games over the internet. An hour later, nothing had changed. No-one had left, no computers became available. Meanwhile, there was the constant honking of taxis in the street. I decided to leave Kangding.

The next town down the road was Luding, about fifty kilometres away. You might expect this to be less than an hour's travel, but the road was under repair, so it took a couple of hours. I arrived in Luding about an hour before dark. Maybe I should find a hotel?

Luding is actually quite a famous location in China due to a celebrated incident during Mao's Long March. A bridge constructed in the early 1700s was crossed by Mao's army under heavy machine-gun fire in May 1935. Subsequently, Luding has become a major tourist destination and has a large and modern hotel. Of course I was utterly unaware of this when I arrived late in the afternoon, but I did see the Luding Hotel opposite. I could not read any of the many signs around the town for other hotels, they all being in Chinese.

I drove to the south side of the Dadu River and up the street to the Luding Hotel. It was a modern and impressive building with carpark and very glossy foyer. I walked in, feeling scruffy and dirty after several days without the benefit of a wash, and looked at the pricelist behind the counter. The starting price for rooms was six hundred yuan per night. Seeming this was more than half my budget for the entire week-duration journey and most of the cash I had remaining in my pocket, it was out of the question.

"Can I help you sir?"

"I am afraid not. Your prices would blow my entire budget. All I really need is a corner in your car park where I could camp."

"How much would you be able to pay?"

"A hundred yuan."

"We could give you a corner of a conference room."

“Thanks, but no...” I left, thinking his suggestion a little bizarre. Later, I learned that such advertised prices in Chinese hotels could be viewed as an initial bargaining situation. Usually you can get rooms for less than half the asked price with a bit of haggling.

I drove back over the bridge and towards the eastern end of Luding. Maybe I could drive some distance out of town and camp somewhere. It was dusk, so I would have to hurry.

A police officer was on the road in front of me, immediately waving me off to the right. I guessed they wanted to see all the documents again, which I promptly dug out of the glovebox and handed over. A few seconds later, a woman officer came to me and asked me in English to get out of the car. There was some problem. A considerable kerfuffle ensued, with many police looking through all the documents, telephone calls being made. The woman told me I would have to wait a while. I waited and waited. As the police roadblock was just outside a restaurant, I took the opportunity to buy a simple noodle meal. “It will take some time,” the woman officer told me. One of the men was on the phone, looking at my papers and talking to someone far away. They were skeptical that a foreigner could legally drive a vehicle. They had never seen such a thing and were pretty positive that what I was doing must be in breach of some regulation or other. I stood around waiting.

Indeed, I stood around waiting for over an hour. The woman wanted to know where I had been, where I was going, why was I travelling alone? “I wanted someone to come with me, but no-one was interested.” They rang the university and spoke to my boss. It was hard to believe that the police would refuse to believe the evidence before their eyes: that I had a valid passport, visa, foreign residence permit, foreign expert’s card, driver’s license, vehicle registration and insurance. This would be more than enough, you would think. No additional permits were required to visit any place I had been. They just simply did not much like the idea. What would they be able to do?

A long convoy of trucks passed by. It was now dark, and these came from the east, the direction I was going. I then supposed the police had delayed me because of these, an impression confirmed by them suddenly telling me: “You can go now,” and handing me back all my documents. “Thank you,” I responded, taking them, getting into my vehicle and driving off.

The truck convoy had not finished, however. After a couple of kilometres, I was confronted by many more trucks, dozens and dozens of them, driving through the dust, their headlights on high beam. The road was under construction, there were piles of materials everywhere, huge potholes, dust, mud and eternal lines of slowly-moving heavy trucks. Their lights were absolutely blinding. I had to drive on extreme right-hand side, knowing there was a drop somewhere in the black, down to the swirling, cold, deep and deathly dangerous Dadu River. There were no crash barriers, no warning signs or anything to mark the edge of the abyss. After a few kilometres of

these conditions, I knew I had to get off the road as soon as possible, find a dry and level bit of ground, and camp.

At a bend opposite some food stalls, I could see a road cutting under construction, a morass of mud and stone. I pulled over into this, got as far from the road as possible (all of about ten metres) and parked. I set up the tent in the lee of the van so that I would have a minimum amount of trouble with vehicle lights and privacy. The tent pitched, I immediately went to sleep. This despite a diesel pump running nearby, removing water which I later found would have flooded my campsite had it stopped.



Actually, it was a fitful night's sleep. This might not be surprising, given that I was ten metres from the People's Number 214 Highway to Tibet. Heavy trucks passed all night long, their engines roaring and gearboxes clashing. At 8 am I rose and put my head out the door. All was quiet, the trucks had stopped, but there had been a little rain and a rivulet of water trickled under the car. The pump had stopped during the night and the water had risen almost to a level where it could have flooded the tent. I stepped out, prepared myself a hasty breakfast and coffee, packed up the tent and was on my way.

**emergency campsite in roadworks**

For the next eighty kilometres, there was a remorseless litany of roadworks, traffic jams and mud, switchbacks through a breathtaking mountain road with hundreds of trucks and everywhere the danger of coming unstuck and falling over the edge and into the river.

There was again not the slightest sign of any traffic control. The people who got through first were the rudest, the most pushy or maybe had the highest rank. As I was stopped and looking at a sign in a small, dusty village on the way, trying to understand from the characters which way to go, I heard a whooping police siren behind me. Looking back, there was a police Landcruiser, its red-and-blue flashing lights busy, speeding towards me. A long line of black Landcruisers followed, also with their emergency lights flashing. This was a Party convoy, a common enough sight but the first one I ever encountered.



**Mechanized road construction in action**

The police Landcruiser sped through the village, not slowing in the slightest for the many pedestrians on the road. Instead of taking care, he honked and got on his PA system and told everyone to get out of the way, the Party is passing through. The pedestrians scattered. The convoy of about ten Landcruisers tore through the village at great speed in a huge cloud of dust, sounding of horns and flashings of lights, and were gone. Without doubt, that was the route to Ya'an and Chengdu. After the dust settled a bit, I followed.

A little while later, I came to a road tunnel, some four kilometres long. As I came out the far portal, I pulled over to admire the view, as had the Party convoy. Each of the vehicles had a middle-aged male driver and a much younger woman passenger. One of the young women called out to me in English. Given my encounters with the police over the past few days, I hardly felt inclined to go and socialize with the group. Later again, I found these Party parties, possibly Party Picnics, to be a very common affair, always with older male drivers and pretty young female passengers. I am sure it is not the Party taking their daughters out for a tour.

Now I was on the last leg of my journey back to Chengdu. According to the map I possessed, Ya'an was connected by 140 km of motorway to Chengdu, and I was only about fifty kilometres out of Ya'an. Since entering the tunnel, the road was sealed and the traffic was light, so really there was nothing to impede me. I did, however, stop in a few places to look at the view.

At the first viewpoint, a Toyota HiAce van passed me, then stopped a short distance in front. A group of men alighted, pulled out tripods and SLR cameras, and proceeded to photograph me. I aimed my rather pathetic 35mm camera at them and retaliated, but not to the same effect I fear. A few of them shouted out "Hello!"

As I descended towards Ya'an, I encountered the first industry, obvious from a long way due to its pall of smoke. From here on in, visibility would rapidly worsen and soon I would be in the grey, ugly city that was Chengdu.



## A Journey to West Sichuan

Curiously, near the smoky industry I again encountered the group of photographers, who took the opportunity to zoom in on my features with their natty lenses.

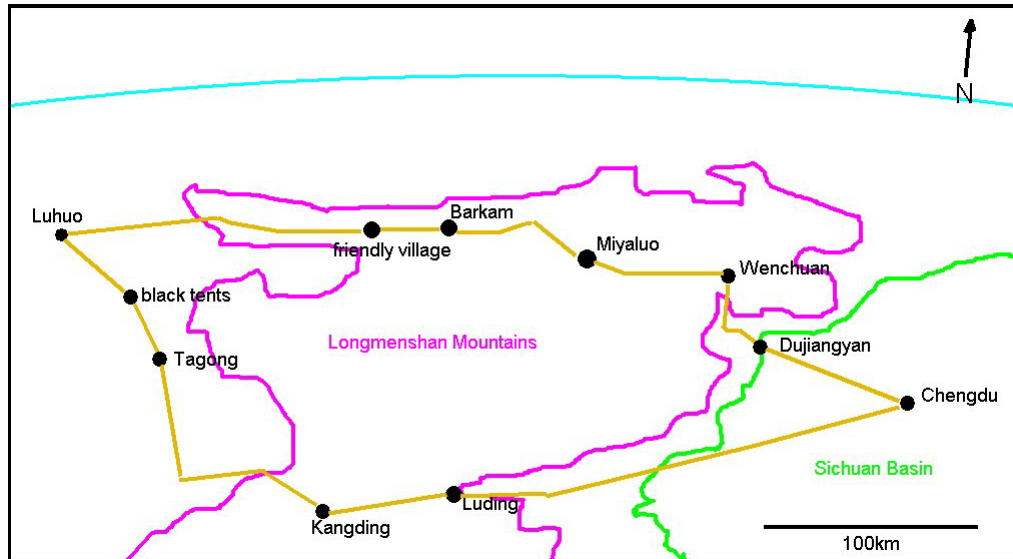
Shortly I was on the motorway, uneventful until I arrived at Chengdu and its toll plaza. Now I was back in the smog, concrete and advertising hoardings that typify modern Chinese cities.



**motorway tollbooth in the outskirts of Chengdu**

I had covered about 1400 kilometres in six days at a cost of about 1200 yuan (\$US150 ).

## A Journey to West Sichuan



A perspective view of the journey through West Sichuan Province

## **A Journey to the West**

Everything was ready. It was now early July and I was on holiday, a holiday I planned to spend driving through western China. My students had had their exams a couple of weeks earlier, but the university administration insisted that I hang around, even though I had nothing to do.

Teaching at university in China was an incredibly relaxed business. Firstly, you were supposed to have sixteen hours of class contact each week, but in effect it was only about ten, what with all the breaks and the way things were scheduled. Furthermore, there were holidays and unscheduled breaks which further decreased the load. The problem was that you never really knew where you stood.

The management of Chinese universities seems to be on a completely ad-hoc basis. You might learn on a Friday or Saturday that there are to be no lectures the following week, or that there are exams. Indeed, on the first teaching day, I turned up to find a single student in my class. All the others were attending an examination about which I had not been informed. So it was with this summer holiday. I had not been doing any work for a couple of weeks but was not free to leave, as someone in the administration being of the opinion that there was something for us to do. Publication of a university calendar, then sticking to it, would not be a bad idea. As it is, someone up in the Rector's office makes completely random decisions, day by day, and the rest of the campus has to live with it. Such is the art of "planning" in China.

I had used this time to some effect, equipping myself with various odds and ends that seemed useful for a trip into the western regions of China. I bought a 50 litre water container, a jerry can for fuel, and a little TV so I could show people the video taken of them. When Andrew had departed, I bought his tent, as the large blue ones were of inferior design and tended to leak when it rained. By July 2<sup>nd</sup>, everything was in readiness. Again, I had rather hoped for a companion on this trip, but this was not to happen. I was talked into carrying a mobile phone, and I also bought a better camera. The digital camera I had been using thus far was of greatly inferior performance, maybe in some way related to its manufacture by Intel Corporation.

At about two in the afternoon, I proceeded out the front gates of the university. I was not going to get all the way to Songpan by the evening, but at least I would be on my way. There had been quite a lot of delay already. I had to be back by September 1<sup>st</sup>. This left me with two months, enough time to get to Xinjiang and back again.

The first day took me as far as Wenchuan. Not wanting to stay in the town, I deviated to the west about ten kilometres, and up a valley to a small village. This I had visited previously with Andrew, Joe and a group of students, we had been welcome there and I knew there was a bit of level ground where I might camp.

## A Journey to the West

Rather than camp in the midst of the village, I preferred to keep to the access road, but found my intentions thwarted by a simple problem. All the level ground was littered with rocks that had fallen off the cliffs above. Not wanting to be woken in the middle of the night by a boulder landing on my head from a great height, I had to seek out some safer location. This was difficult. By the time I had my tent up, it was almost dark.



### **Marijuana growing in village**

As I returned to Wenchuan the next morning, I passed by some village houses which had something that caused me to sit up and take note. There was marijuana everywhere. Not that this was a complete surprise: I had noticed some in this valley when I visited with Joshua and Andrew. It had now grown quite a lot, so much so that its presence was striking.

This was similar to my experience of China in 1981: everywhere I went at that time, you would find marijuana, even on the airport road in Beijing. This suggested a rather more relaxed attitude to the substance than was the case in Australia or the United States.

Further down the valley, I came upon garnet miners, quarrying rock from the mountainside, crushing it and then sluicing it to extract the mineral. The



## A Journey to the West

rock contained maybe ten percent of the mineral, which was worth about \$30 per tonne, so there was a lot of work for very limited reward. Furthermore, this all came at an environmental cost. A great scar in the mountainside attested to the long-term activity here, while the rejects and screenings all ended up in the stream, causing a siltation problem downstream for sure. I doubt if any environmental approval is sought for this activity.



**Garnet miners at work**



**Amazing mountain road on the way to Songpan**

Returning to Wenchuan, I turned towards Songpan, about 200km further north. This proved a spectacular scenic drive, though at times safety aspects of the road were of concern. As is usually the case on these roads, there were many hairpin bends, blind bends and huge drops to the river below with negligible concern for safety. The road was forever rising, with the most spectacular sector being up over a pass about halfway between Wenchuan and Songpan.

Sometime before encountering this section, I had picked up a hitchhiker, a Tibetan man with whom, as ever, there could be no communication. Nevertheless, we both stopped at the top and appreciated this view before continuing. Shortly he was at his

destination and alighted and I was by myself again.

Arriving in Songpan, I went looking for the Traffic Hotel. This was about 15 yuan per night and recommended by the trusty LP guide. For this money, I got to share a room with its own shower and toilet with a German backpacker.

By far the majority of my expenses were for the vehicle: on this day I spent 62 yuan on tolls and fuel, 28 on meals and provisions, and 15 for the hotel. That was to be the pattern for much of the journey.

In the late afternoon, I received a text message from Ms Rong. Could she come and accompany me “as a passenger?”

Ms Rong was something of a problem in my life. She taught at the university, where her specialist knowledge was in the system of partial differential equations used to solve fluid flow. An understanding of this is something rare indeed, so rare that she worked as a consultant from time to time, modelling reservoirs and how much oil they might produce over the decades. Ms Rong was also quite pretty, had paid me quite a lot of attention and had taken me away for a weekend in the mountains a fortnight or so earlier. The problem was that she lived with her husband and daughter.

For a long while, Ms Rong told me she was divorced. She never, however, would let me see her flat and I developed suspicions about the matter, and also the several cars that she drove and described as “belonging to a friend.” A tissue of deceit seemed to surround her life, not the least of which was marital arrangements. Her husband was understandably upset with her behaviour and I suggested to her that she had issues to resolve with him.

Nevertheless, I found it lonely and a bit unsatisfying, travelling through this beautiful landscape by myself and unable to communicate with the locals in any way. Having Ms Rong along might not be a bad idea. She would travel up from Chengdu by bus the following day. That evening, I had a look at the city gates.

I spent the next day in Songpan, walking the streets, meeting the people and seeing what was going on. The first diversion was to walk through the centre of the town, which was blessed with classical Tibetan architecture in many places, but had very Chinese





city gates. The old city was still contained within a fortified wall. I bought myself a warm Tibetan hat for about two dollars. Such was the extent of my acquisitions of memorabilia.



**Bridge in Songpan**

Songpan is one of the most popular destinations with foreign tourists in Sichuan province, being second only to Kangding I believe. The streets are full of stalls selling Tibetan paraphernalia, while in the outskirts there are ponies available for hire, by the day or by the week. I was not particularly interested in being led around on a pony for a day, so entertained myself in the town.

I met a metal worker, then I met the people who ran the restaurant next door, who were his close relatives and they were all Chinese Muslims (Hui), not Tibetans. Then I crossed the bridge over the river (above) and explored the Tibetan quarter, a district of more spacious houses set in small fields.

As I wandered through the alleyways of the Tibetan quarter, again something caught my eye. All of the weeds growing on the verges, and there were many weeds, were marijuana. Some were in bud, so I sampled a bit.



**Chinese Muslim blacksmith**

## A Journey to the West

At 5pm, I received a text message from Ms Rong. She was at the bus stop and would wait for me. This was a bit strange, because I thought I was at the bus stop, it being at the Traffic Hotel. The hotel gets that name by virtue of being at the bus station. “No, by the fuel station.” I had no instant recall of any fuel station, so got in my car and went for a drive. Shortly, there was Ms Rong, with a very limited amount of baggage, all flustered that I had not researched the location of this particular bus stop. I suggested we go and check in at the Traffic Hotel again, but that was not what she had in mind. She was not the slightest bit interested in the place and wanted to get out of the town right away. Though I thought this a bit hasty, I was happy enough to comply and within a few minutes were on our way north. You would think that after ten hours in a bus that you would want to have a look around the (quite interesting) little town.

One problem with setting out this late of an evening was that we could not go very far. Indeed, after about fifty kilometres, it was getting dim and we had to find a place to camp. A large river on our right had a lot of space to spare, albeit mostly a gravel pit. We would stop and camp there. Ms Rong spent the evening writing her diary in the comfort of her feather sleeping bag.



**Gravel pit boys**

The next morning, we were woken by the rattle of diesel engines around our romantic gravel pit hideaway. Upon emerging, the workers were busy excavating and doing gravel pit-style tasks, mostly involving tractors, shovels and gravel. Rong was happy to see them, getting up and being very sociable. The boys were rapt. I don't think they often got much attention from women, certainly not any as educated, pretty and well-presented as Ms Rong.



Ms Rong had done her Bachelor's degree in Mathematics, and had gone on to do a Masters in Petroleum. She had been very popular with the boys while at university and had married at the age of 23 to one of her classmates, a geophysicist. The two of them had lived and worked for an oil company in Tianjin for about ten years before returning to Chengdu, where both of them had close relatives. She worked at the university while her husband had a business selling computers. She was a member of the Communist Party. Though I never met her husband, I had met the ten-year-old daughter, who had taken a dislike to me. Considering the strain that I was putting on her parents' relationship, this might come as no surprise.

From the gravel pit, we got back onto the main road and were shortly faced with a Y-junction: to the right was Jiuzaigou, a fabled tourist resort and not the way we planned to travel at all, and to the left, the way to western China. The road to the left was dirt. That was the way to go.

About 20km further along, there was an escarpment, and at the top of it, a Tibetan tent village. There we had to stop again and try to sort out our route. I found it very helpful indeed that Ms Rong could resolve these problems for me, because I am sure I would have found it a bit daunting by myself, without language skills. Again, to the left, it was the way to the west of China, whereas to the right was the route to Zoige, not as direct. The problem was that there were roadworks on the way. Sigh.

Actually, there were LOTS of roadworks. Culverts were being installed along the route, altogether for about eighty kilometres. I set off, soon encountering a metre-wide, four metre-deep ditch, the entire width of the road. This was not something I could do an Evel Knievel act with, jumping the trench with my little van. Instead, I had to go around. The catch was that there was no prepared sidetrack. You drove off the road, through the mud, the rocks and the boggy bits, and back up the slope to the road again on the other side. Sometimes these culverts were only five hundred metres apart, each time requiring this rather hairy detour. Some of them were truly terrible and I was surprised that the car pulled through. Up to its axles in mud, this plucky little van (with a rather plucky driver I might add) chugged through and out the other side. I marvelled that such things were possible.

Hundreds, maybe thousands, of trucks, vans and maybe cars had been along this road before me. All the detours had very deep wheel ruts, lots of mud, abundant rocks and were dangerous to the well-being of my vehicle. Should I turn back? No! The path behind was so terrible that it could not be worse in front. So I thought. But each hour brought a horror even worse than before, adding to the stock of horrors involved if I turned around. It took all day to cover eighty kilometres.

Curiously, I never thought to photograph these desperate scenes, probably in some way related to the fact that I was far too busy trying to get the poor little car through the chaos. Often it was scraping rocks along the underside, potentially putting holes in the sump, oil filter or differential. Doing this with a car just three months old seemed an act of vandalism. One of the happier

## A Journey to the West

occasions was recorded, when I encountered an excavator which was in some way improving things, rather than making things worse.



Such machinery was actually uncommon on this route: most of the mess was created by men and women equipped with little more than picks, shovels and baskets.

Occasionally, between dealing with mud here, rocks there and large pools of water elsewhere, I got to see herds of yak and Tibetan tents again. Some of the tents were black and made of yak hair, but many were white and canvas.



The tents are often the size of a marquee and usually decorated with classical animals, especially the Tibetan oryx. Seventy years ago these animals cluttered the landscape in vast herds. With the arrival of the Chinese, their guns and curious belief that oryx penis is a powerful antidote to incontinence and the impermanence of life if inhaled as a powder, the oryx is on the verge of extinction.

## A Journey to the West

I came to a small village, and as I drove through, realised I had a flat tyre. Bugger. I stopped and there it was, flat as a pancake. It had to be changed there and then. Out with the jack, up with the wheel, off it came and on with the spare. So far, so good. Being in a village and there being an unknown number of kilometres to the next, it seemed like a good thing to fix the flat, pronto. Finding a tyre repair shop was easy enough, and the tyre repair wallahs got to work on it. I stood and watched, and so too did quite a number of other people. The most interesting of these were a monk and his nun companion, and a phenomenally wrinkly man. They were pleased to be photographed.



The fitters, however, could not cope with a tubeless tyre. They did not have the simple but necessary tools and materials for the job, recommending that I go to a road maintenance camp about ten kilometres away to get the job done. As this was on the way, it was not a huge sacrifice, but I was in terror of either getting another flat, or that they could not repair it either. Fortunately, I did not get a flat and they could fix it. The road maintenance camp was a study in extreme ugliness, however.

To start with, there was an large and vicious dog, chained to an engine block by the front gate. As I entered, it charged towards me in a total frenzy, jaws snapping, growling furiously and was suddenly pulled up by the mass of the engine block. In the yard were all the possessions this dog was guarding: piles of dead tyres, dismembered and rusting machinery, drums of asphalt, heaps of rubble, mud, waste diesel lubricating oil, and domestic rubbish. People lived here and simply discarded their waste in the courtyard. Everywhere there was filth and decay and in the middle of it were families with children. I took the tyre out of my car and brought it over for repair. After about five minutes, it was ready and I paid 30 yuan, far more than the usual fee but worth it for the peace of mind. I rolled the wheel back past the snarling, snapping brute of a dog, and stored it in the correct place at the rear of my van. Then I came back: I had to go to the toilet. The conditions in there were medieval.

In a short while, we were out in the clean, green countryside. This continued for quite a while, yak and black tents everywhere, but slow progress on the

## A Journey to the West

narrow and winding dirt road. At least no-one had taken it into their minds to refurbish this road. It was a lot more comfortable for the lack of attention, though in due course it will doubtless end up a sealed highway.

A campsite presented itself: a beautiful green sward by the bubbling brook, though we were not the first. There was ample evidence that others had been here before us, but no heaps of rubbish, some blackened sticks, and a few turds over behind the bushes. I set up the tent and settled in for the evening.



**Campsite in Aba Prefecture, Sichuan**

Far away, on the other side of the valley, were herds of yak and yet more black tents. It was high, yet only rolling country, without awesome mountains. Some remnant belts of trees remained, but mostly it was bare. These are the high grasslands people speak of in China, where yak are grazed by Tibetans.

In the morning, we packed and continued up the road, shortly to come to a splendid view over a wide and swampy plain. As I got out of the car, I discovered that the back door was open. Fuck! I looked in and quickly ascertained that a pillow (complete with my pyjamas) and a bundle of tools were missing. Fuck! Had I driven off without shutting it? I closed the door and checked the lock. It was not locked, this being the cause of the problem. We had better rush back and pick up the stuff before anyone comes along.

As I turned around, a Dong Feng truck came past and continued on. I drove back along the route as quickly as I could, finding nothing until just a hundred metres from the campsite. All that remained was a packet of Kleenex. Everything else had been quickly picked up, probably by the men in the truck. Fuck!

This became an incentive to never leave the back door of the van unlocked. I had observed this problem previously, but it had hit with a vengeance.



## A Journey to the West

Suddenly I was without tools, without a pillow or towel and (important in a cold climate) without pyjamas.

Returning to the lookout, we stood and admired at the vast expanse of marshland below. Thousands of men had marched through here during the Long March and many had died. Somehow it did not look that challenging, but for unfed, poorly clothed men, slogging barefoot through freezing mud for weeks, it was fatal.

Far in the distance, we could see some sort of village. Looking at the map, I could not see any town, yet this seemed quite substantial. What might it be? Thirty or so kilometres later, I was finally in the outskirts of the settlement, for it was some sort of subdivision, far out in the grasslands of North Sichuan. I drove in to have a look.

Neatly laid out in streets, on quite generously-sized blocks, were several dozen large, two-storied houses of faux-Tibetan design. I say “faux” because they were constructed of concrete in the usual Chinese Communist manner. The Tibetan bits were the checkered lintels and I am not sure that it went much further than that.



What was this all about?

A man came walking towards us and Ms Rong approached him and started chatting about the development. It was a Tibetan village, built by the central government to settle the nomads, the people who lived in black tents. They wanted to accommodate them in permanent dwellings, rather than wintering in tents in snowdrifts. This seemed a laudable aim to me, but maybe there was another agenda. My impression was that the Chinese authorities wanted to have the Tibetans living in towns and villages, to be like them, not to be nomads with yak in the mountains. There was no provision for quartering yak next to the houses, for example. If anyone came to live here, I could imagine yards filled with yak and yak shit in close proximity to the houses. Otherwise, how were they to tend their herds – catch the bus out to the pastures?

Personally, I would far prefer to live in a spacious concrete house rather than a leaky tent without the benefit of a groundsheet, running water or a flush toilet.

## A Journey to the West

Shortly, we arrived in the town of Aba, in the far north of Sichuan province and the last before entering Qinghai province. We found a reasonable hotel near the town centre, but only two beds were available. Ms Rong was put in with another woman, while I had to share with a man. I don't know about Ms Rong's experience of the matter, but my room-mate smoked heavily and watched television for much of the night. When I woke in the morning, he was asleep but the TV was still going. When it came to having the shower, I turned on the hot tap, but there was no water. I requested "kai shui" and finally three thermos flasks of water arrived. A few cupfuls in a handbasin of cold water, ladelled out and over my body, and after a while I felt reasonably clean. The smoker packed and left without making any use of the bathroom.

Aba town was generally busy and concretey, but the outskirts are ornamented with several temples and monasteries and many Tibetan houses. These houses, though constructed of mud brick or maybe rammed earth, are a study in excess. We went to have a look.



These houses were of two or three floors, had glass walls with a southerly aspect, and courtyards surrounded with walls high enough for a prison and secured with massive steel-reinforced wooden gates. Somehow, I suspected that houses of this design would be more appropriate for the nomads: lots of south-facing glass, big undercrofts and courtyards for sheltering yak, and a very secure perimeter wall to keep the yak in and thieves out.

We walked around the village, coming across a group of women with some children and a donkey. I was a bit circumspect about aiming the camera at the women. Rather, I took a photo of the donkey then showed it to the women using the screen on the back. They had not seen a digital camera before, but quickly cottoned on to the idea. Anyway, the Tibetan ladies were very happy to see themselves on the little screen, even if I could not provide a print.



## A Journey to the West

Next stop was a monastery. Aba has quite a few of these, functioning rather in the fashion of private religious schools in an environment where otherwise the students would be taught in Chinese and subjected to endless Communist propaganda. A large monastery was just off the left side of the road as you entered Aba, housing several hundred monks. We stopped in to have a look.

Very promptly, we were surrounded by a crowd of young monks, who paid particular attention to the charms of Ms Rong. She was photographed with many of them, making rash promises to send them all a print. I took lots of photographs of monks and her in various indecent poses.



**Monks in monastery at Aba**

It was time to leave Aba. I am sure I would have liked to stay rather longer, but that was always the problem and I had a lot to do during this two-month break. We followed the main road north out of Aba and found ourselves at the gates of an army camp. Whoops. Retracing our way, there was a rough sign pointing to the right and a dirt track leading up the valley. This was the highway to Qinghai.

Despite rather more roadworks, we made good progress and by the end of the day were over the pass and into Qinghai. This pass was very high – about 4600m – so high that I found it hard to believe. Maybe the GPS was somehow at fault. GPSs are not particularly accurate when measuring altitude. In case you have some way of checking, here are the coordinates: 33deg 26'30"N and 100deg44'17"E and 4605 metres altitude. My notes read: "Terrible, terrible road after crossing into Qinghai..." No doubt it was, but I have no particular recollection of this. So many terrible roads, so few memory cells...

There were plenty of potholes, endless mud, switchbacks and incredible high passes on this route. There was also a little detail that I did not even notice on the way through: there is a mountain 6094m high in here and not only had I never heard of it, I still have to look up its name: this is not easy because it



## A Journey to the West

does not rate a mention in my Times Atlas of the World, but I can assure you that it exists. It is called Amne Mountain and is about 100km NW of Aba town. We passed several high passes on some days, like:

33°18'58"N  
100°28'15"E  
4463m

Coming to a low point in the valley near Darlag, we stopped and set up camp. This was not the most scenic or private place to stop, but it was less likely to be a problem than driving into the town and setting up camp in the main street. That would quite likely draw the attention of the police.



In the morning, the cavalry came by. The visitors were a Tibetan group, probably on the way to their high country home and they were as curious in people travelling in a little van, camping in a red dome tent and cooking with gas on a plastic table. We were interested in their horses and packs. With the exception of monks, Tibetan men wear their hair quite long. This distinguishes them from the Chinese, who verge on the other extreme, commonly sporting crew cuts to match their camouflage and AK-47s.

The road twisted down through an amazing valley. “Breathtaking” was hardly the word for it. This valley is kilometres deep and tens of kilometres long.





## A Journey to the West

Down, down, down we went, all of it on dirt road, around the hairpin bends, and to the bottom of the valley. And there, before crossing a bridge, was a sea of mud. Do I drive through this, or around? I stopped the car, walked down and had a look at the options. To drive through seemed a madness of wheel ruts, muddy water and sloppy mud, rocks and quite a long way. To drive around seemed less of a challenge, just some wheel ruts, some mud, some muddy pools, no rocks. I would drive around.

Controlling a small, conventional two-wheel drive vehicle in deep mud with little wheels and limited clearance is a bit difficult. Plunging into the mud, there is no telling which way the car is going to go or where it is going to stop. It stopped close to where I wanted to go, by the hard road, but not close enough. My rear wheels were in slippery, slimy mud and were not doing any good at all. The only satisfactory way out was to be towed out. I got out my patent plastic towrope and tried to pull while Ms Rong operated the controls. Useless. I pushed. Hopeless.

A group of travellers turned up, a monk and his friends, all on motorcycles. They dismounted and tried to push and tried to pull. This was a bit more hopeful but still did not work. The monk pushed while I sat in the vehicle, operating the pedals. Despite his robust physique, he could not push the van out. Then a truck came along and that seemed much more robust than the monk. With the plastic tow rope attached to him, the van was out in a jiffy.



With the car extracted, I thanked the monk, his companions and particularly the truckdriver for their assistance. Then we were on the way again, through more endless kilometres of mud.

This bogging scene was repeated further along the trail, except in was a heavy truck rather than a little van that was bogged up to its axles, and boy, was it in trouble! I did not stop to offer assistance, not least of which was because I felt that its problems were rather more extensive. When a truck gets this badly bogged, something probably breaks too, especially if the truck is a Dong Feng.

## A Journey to the West

I did not even want to think about what the driver was having to do down underneath, maybe something to do with axles, differentials, tailshafts or gearboxes.



**more quagmire**

Fortunately, my little van could sneak around this, but several trucks were held up, as they could not. The mud did not stop, however, and it went on for many tens of kilometres. It becomes very tiring, driving through such conditions all day long.





## A Journey to the West

Driving through such mud, we passed a black tent pitched by the road. A woman was outside, and as we slowly travelled up the slope, she called out as we waved, indicating that we should stop and visit. “Why not?” I asked. Engaging reverse gear, I went back to the tent and we got out and went over to the tent. The woman and her husband invited us in for a cup of yak butter tea.



Like many of these tents, it was heated with a rather heavy stove, fired with dried yak poo which it is the lady's job to collect and hang out to air. The principal source of income was yak cheese and caseine (milk protein), the use of which I do not understand. Yak butter tea is rather similar to English milk tea, except instead of milk, you use butter, and it tastes somewhat yakky. After that, a few sweets and taking some photographs, it was on the road again.

The drama with the muddy road continued all day long. At about six, we came upon a truck, broken down in the mud, and were flagged down by the owner. He wanted to know if we could give a lift to the nearest town, where he could get spare parts. The town was about 40km away and I was quite unenthusiastic about being committed to travelling such a distance through such muddy conditions, especially as much of the journey would have to be made in the dark. Ms Rong thought there would not be a problem.

It turned out to be a huge problem. Fortunately, this stretch did not involve driving along a road that might fall into a river at any time, but there was abundant mud, plenty of oncoming vehicles, and it started to rain. Well, I suppose if it had rained while we were camped, it would not have been pleasant, but driving so far in these conditions was horrible. I was forever in fear of getting bogged, not a condition you need to endure in the dark, rain and on a major road full of heavy trucks. At about nine, we finally saw some

## A Journey to the West

lights on the horizon, and half an hour later, were in the town. The man got out, gave perfunctory thanks, and was gone. Meanwhile, we had to find accommodation.

After circumnavigating the town several times, we found a room available in a hotel run by a Tibetan monk and a woman. I am not sure what their relationship was. The room was certainly cheap, at 10 yuan per night. There was a great hole in the roof, water was dripping in, and every caution was necessary to ensure that nothing got wet, particularly the bedding.



**The motel with the toilet facilities everywhere**

“Where are the toilets?” I asked. When the question was translated to him, he responded with a sweeping gesture and exclaimed: “Everywhere!” Now, one hotel in Aba had been by-passed because the toilets were some distance down the street, and the usual Chinese rural variety. In this case, there were simply none at all. You were expected to go out into the car park and perform whatever bodily functions were required between the vehicles, the mud and the puddles.

The next morning, the only ablutions possible were to splash our faces with a bit of warm water and brush our teeth, spitting into the drain outside the room. I went a bit further out into the carpark during the night when I wanted a pee, but not too far, lest I find a puddle or a pile of poo in the dark.

After the necessarily superficial splash, we were off on our way, heading towards the city of Xining, still several hundred kilometres away. We would probably have to pass through there before heading west, quite a deviation.



## A Journey to the West

At about lunchtime, we came up on a tent city as we approached a small town. It appeared to be some sort of fair or market, maybe a gymkhana or yak-racing festival. Hard to say really, but there were tents, motorcycles, horses and lots of young men and women all dressed in traditional costume. I pulled in, thinking it was a great place to stop for lunch and take in the scenery.



I pulled up by the stream, not being able to get any closer, at least not without getting stuck in it without good cause. It was perfectly feasible to visit the sights by foot. Firstly, however, there was the question of lunch, and the usual palaver of showing off folding picnic table, gas stove, stainless steel cookware, sharp knives, chopping of vegetables and boiling of rice. Again a little crowd gathered around and Ms Rong explained to all and sundry what I was doing. Maybe we should have had a stall and charged for demonstrations. Personally, I was very interested in these people, most of them quite young, and what they were wearing and doing. Their costumes were traditional Tibetan with modifications. One of the most outstanding was a lad with dark sunnies and the most marvellous necklace. At the pool tables, a group of girls were playing a round. Pool seems to be the national sport of Tibet.



**Cool dude**

Having obtained a bottle of beer, I returned as Ms Rong was finishing off the cooking and we sat and enjoyed lunch. After a little walkie around the fair, which really seemed to have nothing of interest (mostly cheap consumer durables) we were on our way.



## A Journey to the West

The mud and slush just went on and on. The roadworks in this section were living up to the usual Chinese standard: pulling up several hundred kilometres of road, then taking years to replace it. You have to wonder why it never occurs to anyone that there might be a better way. Well I know why. With half a century of stultifying Communist rule, where every decision is taken at the very highest level and any show of initiative might end you up in a labour camp or a grave, you suppress any original thought. The whole system engenders mindless conformity, even when the results are plainly disastrous.



And we arrived in Guida. This was the first opportunity to replace the things lost out of the car a couple of days before: the tools, my pyjamas and particularly a pillow, without which I found sleep quite uncomfortable. While I was looking for these things, I found a solar power shop.

Apart from the interesting variety of home-grown solar products: cells, batteries, controllers, radios and so on, I had a particular need. All the time I had had the car, I had been looking for a 12V light. Suddenly it was here, and I could buy a 12V setup for quite a reasonable price. It was a 12V compact fluorescent – the likes of which I had not seen



**solar power shop in Guida**

before or since – a length of cable, some crocodile clips, all put together for me and for \$10. Now we would have light in the evenings. Meanwhile, a group of monks came in to get something but seemed just as interested in the Western visitor who was dropping in on this small and remote Chinese town.

## A Journey to the West

The route got lower, (from a pass which the GPS said was 4224m and was signed at 4234m) and we descended into an area of rain shadow, with sand-dunes and semi-desert. A groundwater spring was just beside the road and I felt it was time to fill up with some water. I could see that conditions might be drier, as I had been in the east of this province in 1981, which is as extremely dry as any desert in the world. I stopped and got out the water container.

In Chengdu, I had bought a fifty litre container, under the reasonable presumption that fifty litres of clean water would be very necessary out in the deserts of Xinjiang province. The smaller, ten litre container was placed under the trickle from the spring, taking a couple of minutes to fill up. The process was repeated several times. The fifty-litre container was now over half-full, adequate for the time being.

The descent was into the valley of the upper Yellow River, one of China's principal rivers and indeed one of the mighty rivers of the world. Along with the Yangtze, it is sourced somewhere in the far west of Qinghai and flows through northern China to the sea. At this point, there were amazing near-horizontal red sandstone cliffs, providing some spectacular scenery as we travelled north to Xining. At one stage, we stopped and looked down into a narrow chasm, only some tens of metres wide, through which the river passed on its way to the sea. If the river was only ten metres wide, it must have been hundreds of metres deep.



**The Yellow River canyon in SE Qinghai**

We had to pass through Xining. Apparently there was no short-cut from south-eastern Qinghai to the west, and we had to go the capital city of the

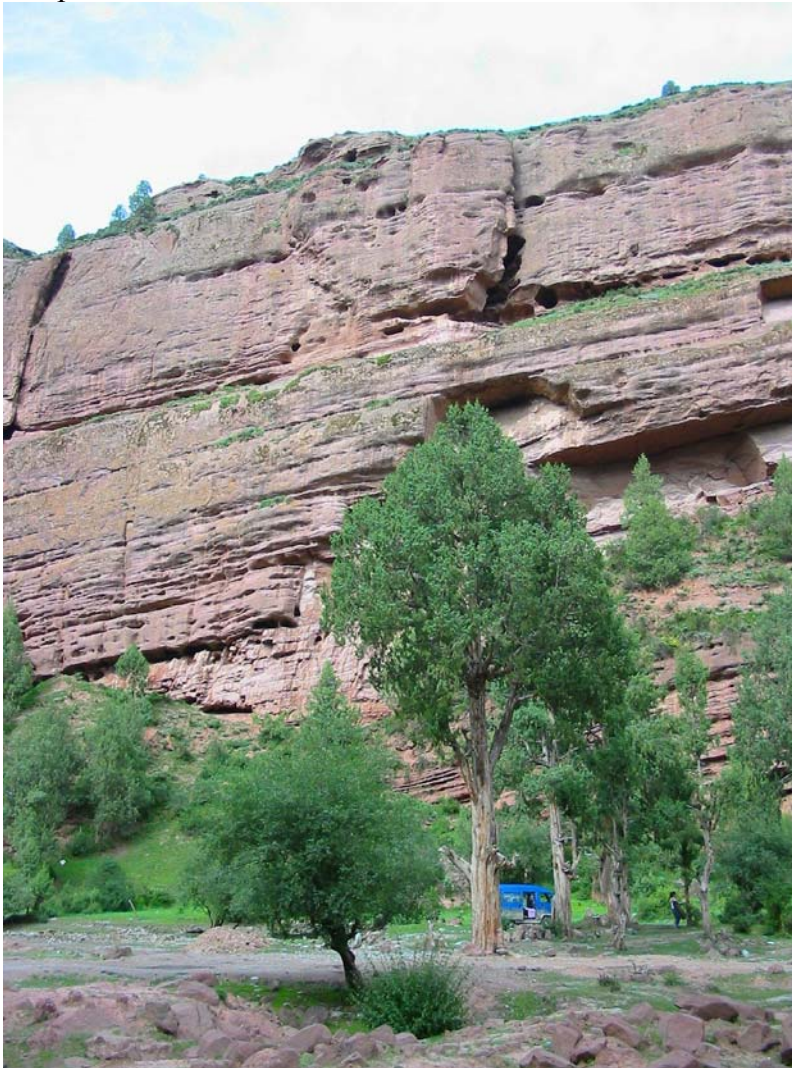


## A Journey to the West

province and then follow another highway to the west. The short-cut roads marked on the map were undergoing roadworks, whereas the route into Xining was plain sailing.

The road twisted down the walls of the canyon, through these red sandstone layers, to the Yellow River. There we crossed the river and started the climb up the other side. Again it was getting late in the afternoon and shortly we would have to find a place to camp.

The canyon narrowed to a red-walled gorge, rather reminiscent of what one sees in the Pilbara of Western Australia: indeed, the entire landscape felt familiar, except that nowhere in Australia is there a river that even begins to compete with the Yellow River. As the car entered the gorge, there was a grassy area between the road and the stream. This was not the main river, but a little tributary on one side, that we were now following. Taking a turn-off, I found myself in a delightful picnic area by the water. This would be a perfect place to camp.



**Romantic grassed campsite in a gorge through the red beds**



Not quite perfect, to be honest. There were some problems here, related to previous picnic parties. Many of the quite picturesque trees had been cut down, probably to fuel picnic barbeques, and there was some rubbish and quite a few beer bottles lying about. I picked up much of the jetsam and concentrated it into a single heap, but did not plan to take it away. If I knew that there was a disposal facility somewhere, I might have done so, but disposal facilities are a rarity in China. I pitched the tent a little back from the stream, not so close that the noise would be a problem during the night.

During the night, I woke to the sound of the stream. Getting up, I could not help but notice that it had risen quite a lot. The tent was still about a metre above the water level, but I then reflected that there had been a thunderstorm in the distance late in the evening. That thunderstorm was quite a few kilometres away, but had been upstream of where we were camped. Should we pack up and move, or just sit tight and keep an eye on things? I was all for moving, but Ms Rong was comfortable in the tent and was not about to be disturbed thank you. I checked the situation with the car, thinking that if we were flooded out, we at least needed to be able to move that. Not a problem. I crawled back into the tent and had a fitful night's sleep. The rush of the stream did not get any louder, nor did water start lapping around us.

In the morning, the stream had subsided a little and I went for a walk. Careful inspection revealed that the entire green grassy area had been inundated recently, as attested by strand lines of leaf litter and wet patches. We had been very fortunate that the thunderstorm of the previous night had not been more extreme, else we could well have found ourselves floating downstream in the middle of the night. At least we were sleeping on air mattresses!

A motorcycle arrived on the scene, with the rider and two passengers. Three to a motorcycle is a common enough sight throughout Asia so this was nothing new. They were a group of teenage boys, all Tibetan and one of the passengers was a monk. The other two were high school students. The rider, a boy of about fifteen, spoke passable English, enough at least that he



could be understood and in turn, comprehended me. He told me about himself and wanted to know about me, asked how much the van had cost and revealed that his quite fancy motorcycle had cost 5,800 yuan. This seemed a surprising amount of money to spend on a schoolboy's transport and I could only presume he came from a well-to-do family. Their nickname for the boy in maroon was "Monkey" which I tried to make him understand was a bit

## A Journey to the West

offensive. Photos were taken, email addresses exchanged and then they were on their way. They wore no protective gear at all – no helmets, gloves, nor (in the rider's case) even some sort of jacket. If I had an only son, I would not allow him to ride a motorbike at all, let alone without safety gear.

Ms Rong and I were in no particular hurry to leave, dawdled with our breakfast and packing, and saw a mounted shepherd pass by with a flock of sheep. These were being driven up the road, and you had to wonder what surprise it might have been for a motorist coming down the canyon. He was constantly going to and from, rounding up stragglers and keeping the flock moving. Quite a few of the sheep wandered towards us, so I chased them back towards the flock. I reflected that a sheep dog would be an asset under such circumstances, so instead of chasing around with a horse, the dog could do the chasing far more effectively. The only dogs I have seen with Tibetans have been huge, vicious beasts that would tear the sheep to bits, rather than simply bark and snap at their heels.



Shortly, another shepherd passed, with much the same failings in the herding department. We had seen large flocks of sheep as well as yak in the grasslands near the border with Sichuan, so they were not new to us. The sheep were hairy, multicoloured things, not likely to provide quality wool but perhaps their meat was adequate. When a car did come by, rather than slowing and gently easing his way through the flock, the driver simply put his hand on the horn and caused the animals to scatter.

At the top of the gorge, the country opened out and now we were treated to straight, wide, smooth road, the likes of which I had not seen since leaving the motorway near Chengdu. The country was lower, drier and frequently there were broadacre farms, sown to canola. The yellow flowers were visible under clear blue skies for quite a while. At this stage, I let Ms Rong take the wheel.

## A Journey to the West

Ms Rong had a driver's license. This is not to say that she was a good driver, having some nasty and dangerous habits with which I was not comfortable. Worst of these was her tendency to drive around blind bends on the wrong side of the road, which when I objected was countered with "If someone comes the other way, I will pull over to the right hand side." At least on a straight road I did not have to cope with this problem. She also drove through villages where the streets were full of pedestrians without slowing, just following the Chinese norm of putting her hand on the horn. Sitting in the front and watching people jump for their lives to get out of your way is a most uncomfortable experience. Here there were no villages, so again I could relax. Only by allowing her to drive and talking about safety concerns could I hope to reform her attitudes.



The sand-dunes and semi-desert reappeared, this time with a vengeance. Huge dunes marched for tens of kilometres along the left hand side and into the distance. Did these hills continue all the way to the far west? Or were they a local phenomenon? Whatever, they were quite dramatic and I had to stop for a while and look at them. Sometimes I feel that I am the only person in China who gets to appreciate the incredible beauty of the country, even its sand dunes.



Yet on the other side of the road, a probable cause of these dunes was apparent. Heavy grazing by sheep was opening large holes in the grass cover, exposing the loess soil below, which in turn might become drifting dunes. There might be good reason to limit the stocking density on these grasslands



## A Journey to the West

and give them some opportunity to recover. While there are nomadic herders without land of their own, this may be difficult or impossible.

And it became drier and drier. The mountains were intensely dissected, giving an ever-changing landscape. The stop to fill up with springwater seemed increasingly justified. These were the first-ever mountains that I had seen with such dissection.



And then we came to the Yellow River (again). This time, for some reason, it was wider and yellower. Maybe this is in some way related to its passage through several hundred kilometres of loess country, some of the loess ending up in the river. We sought out a campground by the river.

There was a campground, but it seemed to suffer some problems. The first of these was that they charged as much as a reasonable hotel, the second was that it had no campsites, and finally, it was full of people in a holiday mood. It actually did not seem a particularly good idea. Oh, and for all this money, you did not get anything you might want, like a warm shower or even a decent toilet. We decided to look elsewhere.

By crossing the river and finding a track leading down to the opposite bank, we found a quiet area without showers, toilets or lots of people making a great deal of noise, all for free. I can improvise with the showers and toilets. We set up and had a perfectly adequate and private evening together. In the morning we went for a stroll along the riverbank and apart from a jetboat laden with adventurers, there was very little to see.

The Tibetans stopped. We had come down so far that we were now out of their zone of influence, and now the villages we passed with Muslim: China's Hui minority. These people are racially and linguistically exactly the same as the Han majority, but are Muslims, do not eat pork and might occasionally attend a mosque on Fridays. The crops changed as well, with canola flowering in the valleys, while the buildings were much lower and very modest compared to those of the Tibetans.





**Hui (Muslim) minority village**

Shortly, we were in Xining, where we were to stay a night before heading west to Qinghai Lake. Ms Rong had decided at short notice that she would return to Chengdu from Xining. She had to rejoin her daughter and husband, and had a job to do. She had exam papers to mark and a consultancy contract to fulfil in Moscow with an oil company. She wanted to see Qinghai Lake, the largest in China, before she left.



Qinghai is the poorest province in China, and in some ways, the capital reflects this. Nevertheless, it really did not feel depressed: the central area was quite neat, orderly and clean, there were modern buildings and the housing was no more or less grungy than in many other places. The population of the province is about ten million, of whom about 1.2 million inhabit Xining.

We spent the afternoon and evening looking around the city, enjoying the markets, the food stalls and walking the streets. I felt as though I was the only foreign tourist in Xining. The next morning, I had the car serviced at Xining Wuling.

Before leaving Xining, I had to go to the bank and replenish my funds. The journey thus far had cost about 1500 yuan. I located and entered the Bank of China, withdrawing enough to replace this and a bit more. I had an envelope in the car, hidden in the driver's seat, containing a substantial quantity of banknotes. I would never know when these might be necessary, or it might become difficult to obtain funds from the bank with a Visa card.

We took the road out to the west, only to find it potholed to the extreme. Indeed, to call the structure a "road" is a misrepresentation. Sometime in the past, there had been a bitumen road here, but it was now a complex of huge holes which you had to negotiate with considerable care. How any responsible administration would allow a major access from the city to the west of the province to degrade to this extent is incomprehensible. Surely they could have done a bit of maintenance occasionally? Patch a hole? Fix the edges? They must have been too preoccupied with a Cultural Revolution or leaping forward. It took hours to traverse twenty kilometres of track.

Things sped up and we started to climb into the mountains. The track improved a bit, though there were roadworks and it rained quite a lot, leaving the route awash with mud. I hoped things would improve.

And improve it did. The higher we went, the better the roads and soon it was up to Western standards. We came to a Y-junction. To the right we went to the north side of the lake, while to the left went to the south side. We went left.

Along the eastern side of Qinghai Lake were gypsum dunes, actually a characteristic of saline lakes in Western Australia. Even with water (and other salts) in the lake, the gypsum –  $\text{CaSO}_4 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$  – crystallises out and is blown by prevailing winds to the east side.

We arrived at the south side of the lake, passing a Tibetan campground on the way. I thought this might be a good place to stay, but it was still only the mid-afternoon. We would explore the south side first, starting with the fisheries.

Being the largest lake in China, and a saline one, it is maybe not surprising that there are fishing boats on Qinghai Hu ("hu" means "lake"). However, the water level has dropped over the years and you have to drive some distance

from the main road to get to the jetties. So down we went, got out of the car, looked around, got back in, and when I turned the key, there was a “click” and that was all. I turned the key again. Not even a click. Maybe the battery was flat. I would push start it. Rolled the car, let out the clutch, and the wheels locked up. It seemed that the starter motor was jammed. I got out and rocked the vehicle back and forth, several times, to no effect.

The starter motor was seriously jammed. Bugger! What was I to do? A car came down to the jetty and Ms Rong approached them and asked if they could give us a tow start. I did, after all, have a tow-rope. Towing was to no effect either. The starter motor refused to unjam and the motor refused to start. This would require some assistance from someone with suitable tools and preferably a workshop. The replacement toolkit I had purchased in Guida was hardly adequate for this. Could the man with the car tow us to the nearest workshop, so the car could be repaired? He was quite obliging, towed the car to a nearby petrol station, to find that the nearest place with a mechanic was some 30 kilometres away, on the (other) road back to Xining. The car driver was happy enough to take us there too, as he was on his way back to Xining.

Fortunately, the road was straight and smooth, the driver did not go too fast and there were no surprises. Shortly we were at a Tibetan town, itself a mess of roadworks, and looking for a mechanic who could remedy the problem. Suddenly I felt utterly helpless, stranded in a muddy town without any wheels, language skills or local knowledge. Ms Rong and the car driver asked around, to find that no mechanic was available, nor were there any parts. The only available service was for trucks. We would have to return to Xining for repairs, nearly two hundred kilometres away, but how to get the van there?

There were plenty of trucks, the sort you would use for carting construction materials, but no such thing of course as a specialist car carrier. It was not as though I could take the vehicle to the bus stop or post office either. Someone thought it would cost about 300 yuan to get the van back to Xining, but goodness knows when.

The car driver commented that for 300 yuan, he would tow us to Xining. This seemed a perfectly valid thing to do, though I was a bit concerned that most of the route would be downhill, at night, on a rough mountain road. Ok, we would do it.

For the first little way, we were towed by the car. However, after about ten kilometres we were over a pass and the route became sufficiently downward-sloping that I could just put the vehicle in neutral and roll. This saved the problem of running into the back of the vehicle in front and instead he became a mere escort. My concern became that it would be too steep and I would have to use the brakes a lot, burning them out. In any case, without a functioning engine, there was no power for the brakes. If it became too dramatic, our escort could drive behind and brake us with engine compression.

The pass was at about 3800 metres and from there it was a downhill roll for a long, long way. It got dark and I turned on the emergency flashers, knowing

full well that the van has a tiny battery, the size you might find in a large motorcycle. The car dawdled along a short distance in front, showing the way with his headlights, me rolling quietly behind. Fortunately, these mountain roads were built for gutless Dong Feng trucks, so they are not especially steep and minimal braking was necessary. After an hour or more, the emergency flashers became weak and finally died altogether. The battery was completely flat, I was rolling downhill in the dark and continued following the car in front. He just kept a reasonable distance away, his eyes constantly on us, illuminating what was actually a narrow, dirt mountain track with a huge drop off into the abyss if I screwed up. After what seemed like an age, the road gradually flattened out to a grade where the van would no longer roll. The tow would have to resume, but there were now only eighteen kilometres to go.

Towing an unlit vehicle in the dark is unremarkable in China. No-one would think it dangerous or even unusual, not even the police. Unlit vehicles traverse the roads all the time, and are one of the hazards of driving in the country at night. At least our escort vehicle was lit, so we were actually no worse than the majority of trucks on the road which have headlights but nothing at the rear to speak of. At least my van had reflective material in the taillight cluster. The car towed the van into the Xining Friendship Hotel where we had spent the previous night, it was rolled into the secure carpark, and we checked into the same room for the same price as the night before. The repairs could wait until the next day.

Early in the morning, the lads from Xining Wuling were around to tow the van to their workshop, which was not far away. They were apologetic and cheerful, and by the end of the day had the problem fixed. Of course it was under warranty, the vehicle having done just under 10,000km since new. Another night was spent in the Xining Friendship Hotel.

One of the little idiosyncrasies of the Xining Friendship Hotel was that it had secure parking. In most hotels, you just park in the grounds and a guard keeps an eye on things and in the morning everything is still there when you drive away. Here it was different. The hotel management insisted that all vehicles were parked in a yard surrounded by a high chain-mesh fence topped with barbed wire and secured with an equally-forbidding gate. This would certainly keep the riff-raff from riff-raffing through your car while you were slumbering with a friend inside. They must have had a problem with crime.

Ms Rong was due to catch a train back to Chengdu. She might have done sooner if it had not been for the starter-motor drama, but in any case, we had one more evening and then the following evening, she would catch the train at 6:30pm. We did not want to stay at the Xining Friendship Hotel any more. Not that we had any problem with it, but it was a bit boring and at 100 yuan per night, eating into the budget. Our plan was to travel out of town somewhere and camp.

“Out of town somewhere” was to the east, in the direction of Lanzhou. Rather than use the motorway, we followed the old road on the north side of the Yellow River. This was quite busy and did not offer any grassy, level, shady



and quiet sites. A side-road went off to the south, which we followed up a valley through fields and mudbrick villages, dodging tractors and pedestrians for about ten kilometres. We passed several occupied camps, provided throughout China so that apiarists have a place to pursue their vocation. Then we came to a bee-free campsite which would suit for the evening.

The apiarists are migratory, shifting their hives in springtime from the warm south of the country to the north, then back again in the autumn. This they do on the back of the ubiquitous Dong Feng truck, and in these seasons, convoys of vehicles make their way across the country. I was to learn about this later.

At the campsite, we entertained some villagers for the evening and again in the morning. Early in the day, I found myself peeing next to a large, flowering, female marijuana plant. I picked a bit for myself and put it in a bag. That might be useful later. After a lazy day in the village, we packed and left.

Ms Rong's train back to Chengdu left at 6:15pm in the evening. About two hours before, the van was parked outside the Xining Railway Station and we went looking for a restaurant – not a great drama as the forecourt was surrounded with them. It was merely a question of making a choice. We ate and then I accompanied her to the train, a fairly modern electric model. She would take twelve hours to make the return journey which had taken twelve days by road. Like so many train journeys in China, it was overnight so she would see zero scenery on the return leg.

After watching the train depart, I went out to the car and immediately departed for the west, to Qinghai Lake to start with. My intended journey was to travel on the north side of the lake to Delingha, continuing on to the town of Lenghu, where I had worked in 1981. Ms Rong had provided me with the names and telephone numbers of some (English-speaking) friends who worked for the oil company there, so that I might have some sort of reunion, 21 years later. From there, I would continue on the Dunhuang and into Xinjiang.

The route we had followed a few days before, the one full of the grotesque potholes, was not appealing. Checking out the map, there was an alternative route that I thought more attractive. That was more or less the one we had come down at night, when the van was broken down. The problem was with navigation. There are few signs on roads in China and in this area, they were all in Chinese and pointing to places that I could not find on the map.

For maybe an hour, I was travelling by guesswork, following a bitumen road which seemed to be 45 degrees off-course. I had a compass, but it was quite inaccurate and at best gave an approximate indication of north. Maybe this is not surprising when it cost just three dollars. In any case, compasses do not work well in steel vehicles. It was a bit overcast and so I was deprived of the sun as a reference. However, by about 8pm (it was still light) I found myself on the aforementioned potholed road, but in the sector that was rather superior, in the foothills of the mountains to the west of Xining. I had been 45 degrees off-course, but not a problem. Plainly I was not going to make it to Qinghai Lake that evening, so I thought about finding a campsite.

## A Journey to the West

Camping by the main road was out of the question. There was too much traffic, it was too open and settlement was a bit too dense. Nor did I see any suitable and accessible space. The best thing was to turn off, as I had done the night before, and explore a side road. Shortly, I saw a narrow sealed road off to the left and followed it.

It was an unusually good road and led directly towards a valley in the foothills. After some kilometres, it crossed a railway and a little valley was visible down below on the left, with a patch of trees, grass and a brook running by. This appeared the perfect, peaceful place to camp. I followed a narrow dirt track to the bank of the stream, parked and pitched my tent. As the night closed in, I went for a walk to check the view back towards Xining. As I looked over the plain, a couple of loud bangs, perhaps explosives being fired in a quarry, disturbed the evening calm. It was a strange time to do shotfiring. I went back to the tent, crawled in and went to sleep.

## A Day with Intelligence

Ants were crawling on the outside of the tent liner. It had rained overnight and indeed was still drizzling, so I felt no inclination to crawl out of my sleeping bag. It concerned me a bit that the track out of my campsite might be muddy and slippery, as had previously been the case in the Xining area. I flicked the ants off the liner from the inside, thinking it undesirable to wrap up the tent with them in place and have squashed insects everywhere.

Someone started undoing the tent zipper. This seemed a bit surprising - it certainly has never happened to me before, but I guessed that it must be some official investigating who was camped at this location. On a previous camping trip I had found myself surrounded by the police one evening and I supposed it might be the same situation now.

The night before I had parted with Ms Rong at Xining Station and headed south and west towards Qinghai Lake. That had been the intention anyway, but I found myself going northwards and ended up on the dreaded route 109, full of roadworks and potholes. As it was about 8:30pm and I certainly did not want to deal with such a road in the dark, I opted to turn off and find a place to camp. A couple of kilometres from the main road I was in some hills, crossed a railway track and found a grove of birch trees by a stream. Access was via a rather rough track, but the ground was level and grassy. I pitched my tent, went for a walk down the stream, then went to bed. During my walk I heard two loud explosions and saw a military jeep, but there was a fair amount of civilian traffic as well, so I was not that concerned.

The tent fly was now open, and a man in full military uniform, including a helmet and armed with a pistol, was looking in at me. He started talking to me in Chinese, which of course I did not understand, and I told him I spoke English. He motioned to me to get up, which I did. I dressed with him watching, and got out of the tent. He indicated that I should pack everything up. Good thing I did not have everything scattered all over the place as was usually the case, but it still took about ten minutes to get the tent down in the rain, the sleeping bag rolled up, mattress deflated and everything into the car. A number of other military personnel arrived at the site and I heard the magic word "laowai" (foreigner). The MP fidgeted with his pistol and I told him not to. And he stopped. I was told to drive my car and another MP joined me as a passenger. I insisted that he wear a seatbelt, to which he was unaccustomed and furthermore I do not think he expected to be given instructions by someone he was taking into custody.

I drove back up the rough track, to be met at the top by a group of military in a Mitsubishi Pajero. My MP passenger indicated that I was to turn left and follow the bitumen road that I had not traversed the previous evening. About a kilometre up the road was a gatehouse with a sign in Chinese and also English which read "No Admittance". A couple of armed guards stood at the gatehouse, a scene which I have come across often enough in my travels and at which juncture I always do a rapid U-turn and go somewhere else. When I had Ms Rong as passenger, we had arrived at one of these in Aba (in Sichuan) and she had me drive in so she could ask directions. But I did not have her with me now, which was a pity.

## A Day with Intelligence

Rather than take me through the gatehouse, we turned left and parked outside a local village store. I guess this was the store that provided for the private needs for the soldiers in the camp next door, but was outside the compound. I was motioned to go inside and taken into the proprietor's quarters, a single room with a stove, bed, table and chairs. The windows were barred. Among the military were a number of officers and a man who spoke a little English, who told me I would have to wait a moment, then disappeared.

After a while, I was offered a cup of hot water, this being a common enough practice in China. "Wo he cafe", I told them, got up, went outside to the car, got my container of coffee, came back inside and added it to the hot water. At all times I took the attitude that I was not under arrest, but just being asked some questions. I also took the attitude that I was not going to submit to military discipline in any way. Some officers saluted me, I just nodded, waved or smiled. "Ni hao" was about as good as they were going to get. I am a civilian, have always been a civilian and am not about to take too much shit from any army.

About an hour after being taken into custody, a man turned up who could speak English. He asked me if I was aware that I was in a prohibited military area, and I said "No". I explained that I was on my way to Qinghai Hu but had stopped off to camp as it got dark. He asked about my route from Xining, the dates of my stay, and so on. I ambled out to the car again, retrieving my digital camera which was lying unsecured on the front seat, my maps, documents and my notebook of my travels. I brought the notebook in, and showed them on the map exactly where I had been, referred to my notebook for dates and times. They looked at my notebook. "Why did I keep these notes?" So I would know where I had been, and what the photographs referred to. I showed them the digital camera and that the last photographs taken were at Xining Railway Station the previous evening.

During the course of this, the interrogators became curious about Ms Rong. They went through my address book, getting the telephone numbers and names of everyone I knew.

My interpreter asked if I liked China. I told him that I loved the landscape, traditional culture and found the people very friendly. But there are things that I don't like, such as corruption. And I believe in democracy, which I believe works better for the people, and I do not like armies of any sort. I asked him if he was a member of the Communist Party and when he told me he was, I asked him why. So he could get a better job and more money. I told him that in my country that is viewed as corruption. I had thought deeply about joining the Australian Communist Party in the 1970s, which encouraged free thought about solutions to social and political problems, but in this country the opposite was the case. Many of my students were afraid to think about problems or express any opinion as to their solution.

That interrogator left and another arrived, with a different language interpreter. A young officer who had been present when I was first taken into custody remained throughout and indeed the first interpreter was present much of the time. I was asked exactly the same questions again, and told that I must not remove anything more from



my car. This I took as so much hot air and from time to time requests were made which could only be met by wandering out to my vehicle. Shortly, I noticed some officers had the door of the car open and had found my video camera. They wanted to see what I had videotaped. I told them that I had a little television set and could show them on that. Again, I ambled through the mass of soldiers gathered in the interrogation room, went to the vehicle, removed my TV and my mobile phone, locking the vehicle as I left. I wondered if I should send Ms Rong message telling her of my predicament, but thought it might cause her undue worry.

The television was hooked up to the camera and I showed them the last five minutes or so that I had shot, mostly around Qinghai Hu. It was completely innocuous and I think a bit boring, but they asked me if I had any more tapes. "Certainly, they are out in the car." Again, I went out to the car, got my camera bag and brought in all the tapes, about ten of them. They said they wanted to see all of them. "Sure, but the battery in the camera will not last long and there are fifteen hours of tapes here. I suggest we go to a big television set and you can see it all in comfort." I indicated that the main problem was the lack of double adaptor for the power socket. A man left and shortly returned with a powerboard which would accommodate both the TV set and camera AC power supply together. The soldiers opted to see firstly a tape of Japan that I had shot the previous year. I put that on and left them to it.

It was lunchtime. Most of the soldiers disappeared, but the young officer stayed. I told him I did not eat meat, but nevertheless a mess tray shortly turned up with a lot of meat mixed up with some vegetables, plus some boiled rice. I think rather to his horror, I ate only the rice. Some egg soup turned up, but no, I would not eat the vegetables that had been in contact with meat. The officer wondered if I was not hungry, but no, I was not.

More interrogators turned up in the afternoon. I got on quite friendly terms with the interpreter, who was rather apologetic about the whole business and who could easily see that a mistake was being made. I was asked the same questions over and over again, about my route, which was clearly marked on a map and supported by notes and location data. "How did you get such accurate positions?" the interpreter asked me. "Oh, I will show you," I told him, again disappeared out to the car, and returned with the GPS. Again I locked the vehicle. The last thing I wanted was for anyone to find the computer. The matter of the video was bad enough, as it would take all day for them to review it. If they got stuck into the computer, I might be in their hands for days, weeks or even lose the machine.

Now the cat was really among the pigeons. Most of them had never seen a GPS and its khaki colour did not help. It looked like a military device. I told them it was old and slow, but useful for finding out where I was. Mostly I was interested in the altitude data at high passes. There were health considerations and it is fascinating to know when you are very high.

Some more people turned up, this time a woman interpreter and male interrogator. They were both in civilian clothing. The same questions were trotted out again, but in particular the GPS was a fascinating spy-type device. I just told them these were common with travellers, hikers and fishermen in the West. My brother had one too. I

supposed that every soldier in the Chinese army had one, huh? No. Well, every American soldier has one in his helmet. I was sort of suggesting that their army was antiquated, which I am sure it is, judging from some anti-aircraft weapons I had seen a few days ago, the trucks they drive and so on. I bet they don't have any helicopter-borne divisions. So it went on and on. They looked at the video of Japan, some of China, some of Australia. Why do I have this video? "Just for memories."

In all of this, I have to say I was impressed by the stupidity of the people I was dealing with. It took them hours to realise that I had a GPS, even though I gave them the notebook with position data in it. It took them hours to look so far as to find my video camera and they never knew that I had a mobile phone or a computer. They never thought to systematically remove and inspect every item in the car, which if you thought you were dealing with a spy might be a good idea. That was what I expected right from the beginning.

By 4:30pm I suggested that they either had to let me go or arrange accommodation for the night. I guess they did not want to stick me in a military prison, so it put them in a difficult position. The decision had to come from above. Finally I was allowed to go, after a cursory inspection of the car by the officers (they never opened a box or took anything out for closer inspection) and I was on my way.

During the questioning, I asked several times if there had been a sign near where I camped. I was assured that there was. I had never seen it, but apologised if I had inadvertently camped next to an installation. After all, the army base was a kilometre from my campsite. My interpreter had repeatedly stated that I had happened to turn up at the wrong place at the wrong time. I kept telling them that if they had just shooed me away, I would have been none the wiser, but by taking the action they did, they antagonised a friend of China and also let me know that important secret operations were going on there. They removed a page from my notes which had a GPS location for a previous night's camp, about 42km on the other side of Xining, next to a peasant village.

As I was escorted away, I looked for a sign. Sure enough, there was one right opposite where I camped. However, it was facing the road, not the traffic, so anyone driving by as I had done saw only the edge of the sign. Also, its positioning would imply that I could not enter the building behind the sign, saying nothing about the little birch grove down below. Of course, had I seen the sign I would have kept well clear, but doubtless my attention had been transfixed by the birch trees, not the hideous building on my right. Such arguments of course do not hold much sway with an army which is happy to machine-gun peaceful students demonstrating for democracy in the middle of the capital city. I will double-check campsites in future, making sure I am much further than a kilometre from any army installation. In fact, I will make certain of this because I was warned as I left that any repeat performance would lead to "punishment", presumably the bullet-in-the-back-of-the-head warning that is popular with the authorities in this country.

## Travelling West from Qinghai Lake

Driving west, then along the eastern shore of Qinghai Lake, I came to a Tibetan campground that I had seen a few days before. Whatever its charms might be, they would not include the army. I pulled off and drove down to the camp, and sought out someone responsible.

An open-air kitchen was occupied by a bevy of entirely pleasant young women, all Tibetan, and some of whom spoke a word or two of English. I wanted somewhere to stay. A more senior woman, say 25 years old, led me away to a row of tents, from which I could make my choice of accommodation. I chose one which had two single beds and a single bare electric bulb with a carpet of grass. I scratched together an elementary meal before it became too dark.

After the sun went down and as I sat by myself in the tent, I could hear loud popular music in the distance. This sounded a bit more hopeful than my own company, so I emerged from my tent and went to see what might be the source of all the noise. A marquee covered in all variety of Tibetan religious motifs was alight and blasting with music. I peered through the fly to see many girls and a few young men dancing. Without further ado, I put my head in and was welcomed by a chorus of “Tashi Delek” – the Tibetan greeting.

They had a massive stereo, the size of which was rivalled only by its distortion. Tibetan popular music was being played and all were dancing to it. I joined in. I found myself very much the centre of attention, surrounded by quite a group of active, attractive young women. The pity of it all was that the only one who could speak more than a few words of English was also the only one with a partner. The music stopped and I supposed that all was finished. As I made moves to leave, they called out: “Wait! We are going to change.”



And change they did. The girls were all dressed in jeans and blouses, but now they took time out to put on traditional Tibetan costume – long, heavy skirts embroidered with brightly-coloured geometric patterns and matching

headgear. Huge amber necklaces, silver earrings and other jewellery finished the scene. The boys did not bother. Then the music started again and I was treated to a display of Tibetan folk dance. After about half an hour, it was all over and I retired to my tent.



**at the Tibetan campground**

The next morning I was in no great hurry to get out of the Tibetan camp. One reason for the delay was that I spent the morning writing a description of the army incident of the previous day. I regret that I have no photographs of the interrogation scenes, but the Chinese army are generally quite skittish about foreigners with cameras. God I wish I could have photographed, even better videotaped, the interrogation. I had asked to, but was refused.

After writing, I was up and about, enjoying the crystal-clear blue sky with its puffs of clouds, the green grass and grazing yak, with the darker blue of Qinghai Lake just a little beyond. All around with the white tents, decorated with Tibetan motifs. I wanted to go to the toilet. I was not expecting a flush facility, but what was provided was pretty basic. Indeed, I stayed at several Tibetan campgrounds during my stay in China and they all offered only the most basic of latrines. This one was the most primitive.

“Cesuo ma?” I asked one of the girls, who pointed to an enclosure a little distance from the camp. This “enclosure” was four or five posts dug into the ground, and strung between them was a strip of tarpaulin maybe a metre high, to ensure your privacy. I went up to investigate, finding a pit maybe half a metre deep and nearly two metres across, over which were positioned some planks. Mercifully, the pit was quite recently dug, so its contents were few, but the whole arrangement felt unstable. The planks were a bit wobbly as I got out on them, pulling down my trousers and dropping my stuff through the gap between, onto the floor of the pit. The uttermost care is required, lest you lose your balance or upset the equilibrium of the plank arrangement. If you screw up, you will be in the shit, quite literally. Of course there was neither toilet paper nor water for washing hands.



## Travelling west from Qinghai Lake

Naturally too, there was no facility for washing yourself. This is one reason I carried a 50 litre container of water, large pots and a gas stove. Once I had about five litres of water warmed up, I was at liberty to have a wash. As the tent had a grass floor, I washed in there, saving the Tibetan maids the embarrassment of seeing my naughty bits.

One thing I had not negotiated with them the previous night was the price. When I asked, I was a bit taken aback that they wanted seventy yuan. For such money, you could get quite a comfortable hotel room with hot running water, albeit without the Tibetan ambience. I suggested that 35 would be more than fair, an offer they accepted immediately. In hindsight, I must say that the hospitality and entertainment the evening before, the music and dancing, may have in some way justified their initial price.

The route from the campground led along the south side of Qinghai Lake, itself about 100km long in the east-west direction. The road follows parallel the shore, a few hundred metres away, while further to the south is a low range of mountains. Above the mountains were billowing cumulus clouds, a meteorological feature of the region. Between the mountains and the road were broad fields of yellow, flowering canola. All along the roadside were beehives and in tents nearby, beekeepers and their honey for sale. I drove by many of them, but was not inclined to buy. Why would I want to buy a bottle of honey? The only earthly use for this is to spread on bread. Could I buy bread on my way? Butter? Well, butter is available, yak butter. I stopped at one of these apiaries. Many people might not: literally millions of bees were swarming around, the beekeeper was working the hives and his wife was doing something with royal jelly and honeycomb. They lived in beside the road in a modest tent next to the hives.



**suit-free beekeeper on the shores of Qinghai Lake**

My brother kept hives for many years and I was quite accustomed to dealing with bees and their comb. Mind you, it is a couple of decades since I actually handled bees and comb, but I guess it is not something that terrifies me. A bee suit is useful though, as is a smoke puffer. I went and watched what the beekeeper was up to, and then had a gander at his wife's business. She was

## Travelling west from Qinghai Lake

patiently extracting something from some comb and I could only suppose it to be royal jelly. However, not being able to speak Chinese, I could not discuss what was happening.



After taking several photographs and watching what they were up to, the least I could do was to buy a bottle of honey. It was all in recycled containers, many of them appearing to have had a past life with chemicals, poisons, detergent or oil inside. I bought a bottle of honey for ten yuan, just \$US1.25. What would I do with it?



Putting my little bottle of honey in the back of the car, I thanked them very much and continued on the highway east. It rose through a range of mountains and then settled down into another high basin, for me new and really I had no idea what to expect.

## Travelling west from Qinghai Lake



The road stretched into the sunset, far away, over the horizon. This was highway driving at its best, reminding me of Australia or the *Adventures of Easy Rider* or something of the sort. Forever on the road, forever mountains, and forever into the sunset. And then on the left side were a pair of yurts, the homes of Mongolian or maybe Uighur or Kazakh nomads. These cylindrical tents are characteristic of central Asia, and here were two. I stopped and looked, but felt shy about approaching too closely. I stood off and took a photograph from quite some distance away. Maybe I should have gone closer but I felt like a nosey foreigner.

As the evening closed, I pulled off the side of the road, following up a dirt track and out of sight from the highway. It was quite a spectacular location, but my principal concern was being not seen. Cooking for myself was uninteresting and I prepared the most basic of meals: just a three-egg omelette, consumed in view of beautiful, sharply-incised mountains - a lonely experience.





## Travelling west from Qinghai Lake

The mountains are probably over thirty kilometres away, such is the clarity of the air and the light. This magical scenery continued. It became my conviction that Qinghai was the most beautiful province of China, with its clear blue skies, open landscape and most staggering mountains. These were dissected into a thousand ravines, with the sharpest form and most exquisite colours.



Such mountains, maybe two thousand metres above the plain around me, marched all the way to the horizon. To travel through such landscape for a whole day or more is one of the extreme pleasures of Qinghai. Nowhere can beat this. But reality returned. You cannot drive all day without thinking about fuel, and a small town turned up, Dulan. For many kilometres, there was an oasis, poplars and cereal crops. Finally, there was a fuel station, where I pulled in and topped up the tank. My Wuling van has just a small tank and it needs refuelling frequently. Only 21 litres were required.



A truck was also at the station. It had pulled in for diesel, but had encountered a ditch where really a ditch was not required and its tandem rear wheels were



stuck in the slop. The left side wheels were deep in the trench, while the right hand side was high in the air, spinning aimlessly. The situation was the consequence of poor, unreinforced concrete; a deep trench where one would be a bad idea; and bad driving. This was the least dramatic of all the accidents I encountered on my journeys through China. This one could be rectified at little cost and no human suffering.

Having refuelled, I left the town and was soon out in the desert, barren landscape with very little to see. Tens of kilometres of utterly blank land went by and then there was a road maintenance camp on my right, which I passed but promptly came to a bridge over a stream. Being the first running water I had encountered for hundreds of kilometres, being hungry and this seeming like the perfect place to enjoy lunch, I stopped. Here I would whip up an omelette or similar and have a filling lunch. I pulled out the table and the stove, set up by the roadside and put a simple meal together.

As I was cooking, I became aware of a man, a boy and their goat hanging around. Where had they come from? I had not seen a man, a boy and a goat on the roadside and now here they were. They seemed pleased with me and the man kept telling me: "Lhasa". I guessed they were pilgrims. What could I offer them? Well, for starters, I did not think I was going to Lhasa. Had the man and his boy been goat-free, I might have given them a lift, but I much doubt if the goat was house-trained and I was not going to carry such an animal in my near-new car. I continued my meal, then went down to the stream to wash my dishes.



It could be said in defence of the goat that it had interesting decoration, but a goat is still a goat and it was likely to pee and shit all over my nice cloth seats. Furthermore, it smelled like a goat. No. I could not offer a lift. In any case, I had no plans to go to Lhasa. That was impossible.

Many Tibetans make the pilgrimage to Lhasa. Some of them travel the whole distance on their tummies, prostrating themselves every few metres. They, however, are the exception, and many more travel by bus, truck or simply hitchhike. There are about six million Tibetans, for whom Lhasa is the objective of a pilgrimage at least once in a lifetime. These were not the first

## Travelling west from Qinghai Lake

pilgrims I had seen, but the others were doing it the hard way, flattening themselves on the road every few metres.



**ever more barren landscape of western Qinghai**

After tidying my dishes and things away, I bid the pilgrims and their goat goodbye and resumed the journey westwards to Golmud. From there I would probably turn north, heading towards Lenghu, the Buddhist caves at Dunhuang and then into Xinjiang.

The landscape became ever more barren. This was no surprise to me, as the area around Lenghu, the town where I worked in 1981, had absolutely no vegetation for great distances around. All there was to see was gravel and barren mountains: not a blade of grass, let alone a tree, was visible for hundreds of kilometres. Golmud is approximately similar longitude to Lenghu, so as one approaches you can expect to see similar landscape.

On the road ahead I could see two cyclists. There are lots of Chinese cyclists in China, but their style is so different that you can tell whether they are Chinese or not from a kilometre away. The first difference is that Chinese cyclists never wear helmets. Nor do they have panniers, more likely a big basket or nothing at all. These people had panniers and as I approached, a trailer behind one of the bicycles. The Chinese do not do bicycle trailers.



I stopped to have a chat with them, finding that they were Germans who had ridden all the way from their country, via India, through Tibet.

They were Lothar and Lisbeth. During the brief meeting, I found that they were planning to visit Chengdu, so I gave them my mobile phone number and asked them to contact me when they arrived (They did do so a couple of months later, and stayed for three weeks).

One of their concerns was the availability of water. I could assure them that there was nothing for about another hundred kilometres, not until where I had met the pilgrim and his boy and goat, by a stream.

The road continued to be much the same: boring desert landscape right up to the very gates of Golmud. Be assured that there are gates: the city has erected a toll gate at each of its entrances, charging 5 yuan per vehicle to enter or leave the city. This is a common enough wheeze, providing a roads budget. Approaching Golmud, I saw two more long-distance cyclists, this time heading west and with a difference. They were Asian, but dressed in cyclist's lycra, crash helmets and of course riding quite fancy bicycles. In the outskirts, I came across another person who was obviously a member of their party, stopped and asked who they were and where they were going. It was a group of four Korean men, and their objective was Lhasa. Indeed, Lothar and Lisbeth had just ridden from India, through Nepal, to Lhasa and over the Tibetan Plateau to Golmud. I felt such a wimp, doing the trip in a car. These people were doing it the hard way. Well, there were people doing it an even harder way: the pilgrims, walking the whole way and prostrating themselves on the road every five metres.

Then I was in Golmud. Only one hotel was permissible as accommodation for foreigners, the "Friendship Hotel." There was a bit of searching around to find it, through the front gate, and into the car park. It was the usual arrangement, with a guard at the gate and the parking area full of swish cars, the sort that party officials drive: Mercedes-Benz and Landcruisers. I, a foreigner, arrived in a humble Wuling van, the sort of vehicle that rural people use as taxis. I parked and went into reception. I had covered 3300km since leaving Chengdu.

Beds were available in the back packer dormitory for 35 yuan. Only one was available, so I accepted without debate, especially as there was a hot shower, something I had not had for a couple of days. The bed next to mine had a little koala on the zipper. Plainly, whoever it was, she (for it had to be a girl) had been to Australia. I disappeared into the shower.

The "hot showers" turned out to be a cavernous void with slime-covered concrete. One corner had a shower, with just a single galvanised pipe leading to a large shower rose. I felt the pipe. It was cold, not an encouraging sign, and it ran across the floor and through the wall on far side, many metres away. Before even thinking of undressing, I turned on the tap and let it run. After an age, the water ran luke-warm. It was now within the advertised "hot water" period, which generally was only a couple of hours per day.

## Travelling west from Qinghai Lake

There was absolutely no provision for privacy. It was the only shower for the “backpackers”, who were of either sex. There was not even a bolt on the door, nor a shower curtain. I could only be prepared to yell out if someone inadvertently came marching in while I showered. This was not necessary, however, as my shower was as brief as possible because the water was scarcely even luke-warm. It was just that it was not quite cold.

Returning to the room, it was suddenly occupied by four Asians: three women and a young man. The owner of the koala toy was a Korean woman who had spent a year in Sydney, while the other three were Japanese. They told me of their plans, which were to sneak into Tibet. They did not like the idea of paying the huge fee for the permits and felt they could just march in without any particular problem. It probably helps when you are Asian.



## Lhasa Bound

In the morning, I had something of a discussion with the Korean girl, Chong Che. She did not tell me how they planned to “sneak into” Tibet, but this much I knew. Thirty-six kilometres south of Golmud was the army post, checking vehicles travelling to Tibet for foreign travellers. My plans had been to travel to the far north-west, to Xinjiang, but the entry to Tibet was so close. Should I consider going to Tibet? “I could give you a lift – I have a car,” was my offer to the four.

“No thanks, we have sorted out our transport arrangements,” Chong Che told me. I felt a bit deflated, but her decision was quite rational. To travel with a fair-haired Western man would be a sure recipe for discovery. Maybe I should get a Tibet Travel Permit.

The China International Travel Service had their office in the Friendship Hotel, and it was they who did the Tibet Travel Permits. I had to wait for some time for them, and when the woman finally opened the doors, I entered a small, dingy office and sat down. “Can I get a permit to drive my own car in Tibet?” I asked. “I have been told that it is impossible.”

“Yes, I believe it is impossible. In any case, I cannot give you an answer. I can ring Lhasa tomorrow and see.” It was Sunday.

“Thanks very much. I will come in and see you tomorrow.” With that, I left and wondered what my next move should be. Maybe I should go out and see what there was south of Golmud. Before leaving, however, I thought I should visit the markets and buy some provisions. My food box needed some fruit, vegetables, eggs and maybe milk before setting off, for Tibet or anywhere else. I drove around the town and found what I wanted. For less than twenty yuan, I had an adequate supply of fresh food, enough to last a few days anyway. Bananas and beer were some of my acquisitions, costing 18RMB.



Wedding limousine

And another thing. This town was the only place where I ever saw a poster of Jiang Zemin, the President of China. Possibly he had something in his mind, but by all accounts, Jiang Zemin has very little to say. Unlike Chairman Mao, whose collected works occupied shelves in a library, or Deng Xiaoping, who at least said enough that his daughter could write books based on it, Jiang Zemin has uttered three original sentences. All three of them are very simple and Chinese students are looking forward to a future where all they have to study are his thoughts, rather than those of Deng Xiaoping or Mao.



Shortly after my visit to Golmud, Jiang Zemin lost his job as President and was replaced by his henchman, Hu Jintao. The latter is an engineer with even fewer thoughts than Jiang Zemin. As I reflected on this, I found the road south from Golmud, the road to Tibet.

As I was heading out of town, I saw a shop on the right-hand side with a whole lot of Chinese PLA greatcoats hanging out the front. I did a U-turn, drove along the footpath and stopped outside. "Dou qian?" Sixty yuan. Without debate, I pulled out the money and paid. Having brought clothing for a summer in the Gobi Desert, I had nothing warm to speak of. Whatever else, a warm coat would be useful on the Tibetan Plateau. I drove out of town and shortly was on a winding road through the most spectacular desert landscape. Red and orange sandstones were incised deeply by gorges and canyons, while all around were very impressive mountains, equally red and rugged.

While rounding a sharp bend over a gully, I found a Toyota HiAce van lying on the side of the road, obviously having been rolled several times. The road was littered with the detritus, broken glass, clothing, papers and many other bits and pieces. The van had also had a serious frontal collision, probably killing or injuring the driver and anyone else seated at the front. A row of six backpacks were lying by the verge, testament to a number of foreigners having been seriously injured in this accident. Yet I was only twenty kilometres from Golmud and about 1100km from Lhasa.

Further along, I felt I had to stop as the scenery was just too dramatic and I could not bear to keep driving by. I left the road, drove up to a viewpoint some distance away, stopped and admired the amazing landscape. A police car passed below, followed by an ambulance, and I then continued on my way. Shortly I found myself close behind them, travelling at the most relaxed of speeds, a speed where even a slowpoke like me could catch up with them. I just dawdled along behind, seeing no reason to pass them by, not least of which was because I had black (foreigner's) plates and an AUS sticker on the rear of the car.

Not much time passed before a long line of trucks appeared in front. The police, ambulance and a taxi just passed them by, for the simple reason that whatever the trucks had to stop for was not their business. Quite often, there are lines of trucks because of some official check, or one is bogged and the rest cannot get by. Being about 35km from Golmud, I supposed they were stopped at the army checkpoint. I decided to take my chances by staying with the police and ambulance, which drove down the left-hand side of the road with me in tow.

Uniformed army officers were searching the trucks on the right. They took not the slightest bit of notice as I passed on the left, following the police car and ambulance through an open boom gate on the other side. I was completely unchallenged and continued on about five hundred metres before I could even relax and take a breath. I was through the principal checkpoint on the road to Lhasa. Elation. "I have made it!"

There was actually quite a long drive within Qinghai Province before entering Tibet "proper". I say "proper" because Tibet (historically speaking) included all of Qinghai, a vast chunk of Sichuan Province and parts of Gansu. Several hundred kilometres of Qinghai remained to be traversed, including a number of towns and a fuel stop. There were a number of other checkpoints with the barrier down across the right hand side of the road. However, it was not barred on the left and usually the police were not to be seen, so I just drove straight through. Probably my guise as a local taxi served me well, with the officer presuming I was local traffic. In any case, they did not have vehicles so were not in a position to chase after me and ask why I had not stopped.

In the late afternoon, two Buddhist monks were standing on the side of the road. My policy, ever since the first trips done into West Sichuan province, has been to give Buddhist monks a lift. If nothing else, I feel this a source of good karma, ensuring that I will not come back into the next life as a dog, pig, maggot or whatever. The monks were pleased to accept.

Both of them were very young, I guessed they were in their mid-to-late teens. "Lhasa!" they cried when I asked where they wanted to go, and as I travelled along I would occasionally hear: "Lhasa! Lhasa!" I would take them there. Lhasa was a thousand kilometres away, a thousand kilometres over the world's highest landscape, the Tibetan Plateau. This has a mean altitude of 5000 metres and I would take these boys over this and to the other side.



## Lhasa bound



The road was rough, progress was slow and gradually the Kunlun Ranges went by. These mark the northern extreme of the plateau, and of Tibet as it is today. They were a huge range, extending from horizon to horizon, over six thousand metres high and riven with glaciers. Somewhere in there was the Tangula Pass, which at about 5200 metres, marks the border of Tibet. There would presumably be another checkpoint here. Meanwhile, I enjoyed the Kunlun Shan.



**Kunlun Mountains and their glaciers**

After a long uphill haul, we arrived at the top of a pass, not the Tangula Pass but another, but equally impressive at 5010 metres. Here I stopped with the monks, met some people who were hanging out at this improbable place, and took a few photos. This was by some margin the highest pass and the highest place I had ever been to. It is one of the highest passes in the world, though, as I was to find out soon, outdone by others.



We had still to enter Tibet. Indeed, this was not to happen today, rather, we stopped somewhere on this bleak and inhospitable plateau, and put up out tents. I had my little red tent, mattress and sleeping bag, while the monks had a tent and their cassocks. Out of pity, I lent them one of my spare sleeping bags and some sleeping mats, as I was certain they would freeze without. One of the unspoken deals you make when picking up monks is to provide them with somewhere to sleep.



The following morning, the car would not start. No amount of cranking, no amount of fuel tipped into the manifold, would get it to fire. I was sure the problem was the lack of oxygen, the mixture being too rich to ignite. Normally, the car sorts this out for itself, but today, apparently, it had lost the ability to resolve the issue. In the twelve hours in which it had been sitting idle, the car's computer had probably reset itself to sea level. Being at an altitude of five kilometres, it could not get the mixture right until the engine had run a little bit. There was quite a lot of huffing and puffing, some friendly truckies came by to give a hand, then suddenly the engine fired and all was well. I reminded myself to note this idiosyncrasy for the future. We drove out onto the highway and continued on our way.

We had camped this time, as with so many others, by some construction works for the Golmud-Lhasa railway. This was being built over the highest imaginable route; the train itself will apparently be pressurised in the fashion of jet aircraft. Everywhere there were works, often of impressive bridges all covered in red flags. The Chinese love to cover their construction sites with coloured flags and out in Tibet, red flags just to show who is boss. This railway was scheduled to be completed in 2009 but looked well along the road to completion (actual completion date: May 2007).

For much of the day, we were driving alongside the Kunlun Shan, our altitude gradually increasing, until finally we were at the Tangula Pass. Here I expected to find a checkpoint, and there was none. The pass was at 5231m and was to be a stopping point on the return journey. I did not record the height because the army had instructed me not to, but this national secret is emblazoned on a large rock for all to see and photograph.



Now I was in Tibet “proper”. Thus far, the authorities had not been a problem and now I was about two hundred kilometres south of Golmud. As we kept travelling through the day, often dealing with many kilometres of mud, the prospect of being turned around and forced to retrace my steps to Golmud retreated. No, it would not happen. I passed another unmanned checkpoint, at least the officer was not to be seen. You had to wonder if these men do or think anything when they see a strange car drive by without stopping, fair-haired foreigner at the wheel.

Four hundred kilometres had passed, and another checkpoint hove into view. This one had someone wandering around on the road and as I approached, he put his arm and hand up and signalled for me to stop. Rather than just charge by, I obeyed his instruction. He was a police officer wearing the blue uniform with silver buttons and white hat, exactly like what was worn in Australia about thirty years ago. The big difference was that he did not wear a gun. He came up to the window and I handed him the usual pile of documents: driver’s license, vehicle registration, insurance, passport, foreign residence permit and so on - quite a heap of them. He took them and looked through.

“Where is your Tibet Tourism Permit?” he asked.

“I think these documents should do,” I responded.

“You must have a Tibet Tourism Permit.”

“What is that?” I asked, looking dumb. The officer stomped off to the car in front, returning with an imposing document issued by the Tibet Tourism Office. Looking at it very superficially, I could not help but notice that it cost 1,600 RMB. This was my budget for about two weeks’ travel, which was one of several reasons why I was none too keen to get one. “Can I get one here? How much do they cost?” I rather hoped he would take a bribe.

The officer went back to the vehicle in front, returning the permit to its rightful owner, then went off for a little conference with someone in the police

box. When he returned, he spoke not to me, but to the two Tibetan monks. After the briefest of discussions with them, he said to me: “You can go now. Welcome to China!” “Welcome to Tibet,” I muttered, starting the engine and getting out before he changed his mind. My impression was that the police officer could see himself being stuck with two Tibetan Buddhist monks to look after if he turned me around, so decided to let me through.

That was not the last checkpoint, not even for that day. Another hundred kilometres further along, there was a young cop doing his duty. I handed him all my documents, he looked at them and then waved me on. Was he expecting me? How could I tell? You would think these posts would be in telephone communication with each other, that when I drove through one post they would ring to tell them that a little blue van, registration A 3084, had just driven through without stopping. Conversely, the senior officer could ring the junior officer to tell him that a foreigner with two monks on board was passing by, and to let me through. But maybe they do not. Maybe they are so disorganised they have no idea what is going on



**Chinese roadhouse in Tibet**

The route through the Tibetan Plateau, though at around 5000 metres, does not have high mountains lining the route. Instead, there are rolling hills a few hundred metres higher, rather than huge and jagged ranges. The scenery is thus not spectacular, just quite ordinary. Indeed, the scenery in West Sichuan is far more astonishing, with mountains over six thousand metres high incised by valleys several kilometres deep. Occasionally a small settlement would be built on the route, eyesores of the first magnitude. Naturally, they did not have any vegetation to hide the ugliness or break up the straight lines of buildings. But it went much further than that: mud, dead tyres, dead vehicles and particularly black diesel oil dominated the landscape.

A horn was sounding behind me. I was far from anywhere and had not seen another vehicle for some time, driving up a hill and keeping to the right. There was plenty of space to overtake, no problem. I checked in the rear vision mirror. The vehicle behind was a jeep, beep, beep, beep. Maybe my luck was up? The honking continued as it passed, and as it did, there was waving and cheering from inside. I looked to see the Korean woman, Chong Che, and her Japanese companions. They were in a police car and on their way to Lhasa. All were happy and waving. I waved back, wondering what on earth was going on. This seemed a strange way to sneak into Tibet. Had they been caught and being taken to prison?

Again it was getting dark. Rather than camp out in the open, I thought it best to shelter behind a wall in a village somewhere, so it was a case of looking out for a likely spot. Here on the highlands, villages were not common and when they did present themselves, not always suited to camping. Having found a village, we set up, cooked and turned in. Though a few curious little boys hung around, we were not bothered by them and all was peaceful. The propensity of villagers to intrude was not realised.

The camp (and village) was at 31°49'06"N and 91°44'01"E, altitude 4796m. During the night I felt as though I was suffocating, in my quite cramped tent at such a high altitude. I had to get up and have a breather outside and a drink of water. Hyperventilating seemed to help.

One problem I did have in the morning was: where to have a shit? We were not handy to a latrine, but nor was there a bush to hide behind. I had no choice but to dig a hole and squat out in the open. Not quite the open. I was behind the car, but only a few metres from our tents. The "hole" was more a scratch in the moss: the ground underneath being very hard indeed, possibly due to permafrost. The lack of toilets was a universal problem in Tibet, where latrines were a rarity.

The whole of the next day was spent travelling across the Tibetan Plateau, enduring long delays due to roadworks, and where the roads had not been worked upon, mud, pools and rocks – usually altogether – were a serious hazard. Thousands of trucks had traversed these roads and they left deep ruts which were a real problem for a little van with little wheels and not much clearance. As I drove through, there was usually the clatter and banging of rocks hitting low-slung bits of the underbody. At one stage, the clattering became a continuous scraping and when I checked underneath, the air conditioner radiator had shaken loose. Not that it had been secured in a quality manner anyway, but it had hit some rocks and the support bracket broken. I tied it up with a bit of rope and in the next town, Nagqu, I found myself a mechanic who secured it equally roughly for a mere 50 yuan. The monks went off for a feed while this was being done, again at my expense. One of the deals when you pick up Buddhist monks is that you feed them.



With any luck, we would make it to Lhasa on the day. It was 3pm and there was only about 400km to go, but that is not the way things happen. Anyway, Tibet is not really a country to cross at maximum speed. It is not an experience that comes lightly.

A long line of trucks appeared, a sure sign of trouble, but as always, I just drove past. Maybe there was something at the head of the queue which light vehicles could by-pass, but in this case, it was not to be. In any case, the vast majority of the trucks were army vehicles, maybe seventy of them. Many had twenty or thirty men seated in the back, young boys really who smiled and waved at seeing a foreigner. There was no way I could avoid being seen and really I just had to brazen it out.



**Bailey bridge under construction**

The problem was that a bridge was being repaired. With the concrete usually being a weak mix, the aggregate being rounded and often also quite weak, and the reinforcing thin and rusty, the strength of these bridges leaves quite a lot to be desired. In any case, the authorities had decided to close the bridge and perform immediate repairs, not allowing even the army to cross. A Bailey bridge was being assembled within the existing concrete bridge, reducing the likelihood of a sudden collapse. I just had to wait.

The army tried to offer assistance in this exercise, but ended up creating chaos by delivering far too many girders. After making life completely impossible for the regular bridge-builders, they gave up, lit their cigarettes and drank. The empty bottles were thoughtfully disposed of into the river.

While I waited, I could not help but observe some other army men checking the level in an auxiliary fuel tank. They smoked while topping up the tank – with petrol. With seventy trucks parked bumper-to-bumper, this could have been the setting for an excessively amusing army truck fire incident.



**long line of trucks waiting for bridgeworks**

The construction of a bridge fifty metres long is not something that can be achieved in an hour. Indeed, the delay was more like four or five hours. During that time, the army lost patience and forded the river. So too, did a lot of others: those “others” might have included me, but I was loth to follow the masses through. Of the seventy-odd trucks, five got seriously stuck in the river, A taxi made it through with some dramatic scenes, while the four-wheel drive vehicles had no trouble at all. The little Wuling was only three months old, was not designed to ford wild Tibetan rivers and I thought discretion to be the better part of valour. Being stuck in a queue is heaps better than being stuck waist-deep in freezing water.



**monks pitching their tent beside a yak poo wall**

That evening, we again had to camp at a Tibetan village, this one a little lower at a mere 4370m. This one had rather more walls, including a stockyard built almost entirely of yak poo which seemed a pretty ideal toilet. The villagers came to see what we were up to. Not just a few villagers either, but many, all of them friendly but of course there were the usual communication problems. I put on the video with the little TV set to amuse them and was later invited into the home of the family next door.

I have a feeling that many foreign visitors would camp in these villages: they are few and far between and there is quite a trickle of cyclists passing through. The next morning, breakfast was delayed until we passed through another town: Damxung. Here, the facilities were reasonably civilised, better than whole of the journey from Golmud. Mostly, however, these major towns lacked Tibetan character. They were in the usual Chinese style: lots of concrete, buildings covered in white tiles and of course, signs. The signs were always in Chinese, with Tibetan in a smaller font as an afterthought. Many had no Tibetan at all. You could tell who was running the place.





**family in living room: solar controller on shelf behind**

Only ninety-odd kilometres from Lhasa, I stopped at a town for the simple reason that I did not want to rush through. It was the first town possessing Tibetan character, though this was a mere shadow of the extravagance of West Sichuan. The buildings were much older, however, so maybe a bit more authentic. And in the outskirts of the town were some hot springs, which I felt compelled to investigate.

The massive earth movements that have created Tibet also resulted in a great deal of heat coming up from deep underground. Here was one such locality, and the hot water (steam actually) was used to provide energy for some industry, the nature of which escaped me. Then it was back into the car, and downhill all the way to Lhasa.



**my home is a fortress**

## Lhasa bound

The road to Lhasa was beautiful, wide, smooth road. It was not straight, but had gentle curves, with ample crash barriers to prevent you and your car falling into the raging river just a few metres away. For the first time since leaving Golmud, there were trees, and then crops. Huge houses, more like fortresses really, were often to be seen by the river, often on prominent points where access would have been very difficult. Perhaps it should be said at this point that pre-1951 Tibet was a wild and woolly place, with many gangsters and no police. Your only security was to live in an impregnable fortification.

This river flows directly to Lhasa, where it joins another which goes on to become the Brahmaputra. The road followed alongside, leading us to the outskirts of the city.

Lhasa has quite a small population, only a couple of hundred thousand. It nevertheless had a main road leading in from the west, set up in the usual Chinese Communist style: a huge, wide avenue lined with white-tiled concrete buildings, lots of signs and immense numbers of street lights. I came to this, driving twelve kilometres in a straight line, wondering when it was ever going to stop. Then I came to a set of traffic lights, and to the left were the Potala Place and the Old City. The two monks were asleep in the back and I left them be. I executed the left turn, driving past an army barracks, and again turned left, into Potala Square and its car park. I stopped and woke the monks. "Lhasa!" I said. With that, the two lads got out, posed for a photograph in front of the Palace, then disappeared.





## Around Lhasa

The monks disappeared and I found myself standing in Potala Square. Here and there were groups of mostly Chinese tourists, interspersed with Chinese army personnel and police. Quite a lot of people were getting dressed in Tibetan costume and posing for photographs in front of the palace.

Wandering around, I found myself in front of the “Liberation Monument” on the other side of the square. I knew the nature of the monument not because of anything written on it, but its recent unveiling celebrating fifty years of a “liberated” Tibet.



**"Liberation" Monument**

Built in the usual Communist concrete-and-white tile style, with some socialist realist statues out the front, it told all the world of its function, *in huge Chinese characters and tiny Tibetan ones*. Presumably whosoever made the decision to erect this wonderful monument felt that the majority of the people in the city, the Tibetans, are of only secondary importance. I appreciated this wonderful addition to Potala Square, considered how it fitted so nicely with the huge sign in front of the Potala Palace, the adjacent army base and the guards in the square. The Tibetan citizens of China are all so lucky to live in the most liberated country in the world.

## Around Lhasa

There was a little matter to consider: where I was going to stay. Good old LP had a number of cheap hotels and backpacker establishments listed, so I started with the Yak Inn on Beijing Lu. The streets also have Tibetan names, but since they have been liberated, the Tibetans have changed all the street names to those of Chinese cities, complete with Chinese characters and so on. Lucky Tibetans, having the opportunity to learn all their street names in Chinese characters. When the rest of us are so liberated, we too can have all our streets named after Chinese cities and those names put up in Chinese characters to help us with our reading comprehension.

I drove down Beijing Lu about a kilometre and there was a sign in English telling me it was the Yak Inn. I drove right in and went to have a yak with the people at the counter, who informed me that the only available rooms were over 200RMB per night. This was a bit over-budget, so I went around the corner, finding yet another place that was pretty well booked out, except for the most expensive rooms. Only on the third attempt did I find a hotel with beds at a reasonable price, very reasonable in fact at 30RMB. I daresay the Yak Inn was better, but if I spent several days there, it would blow a large hole in my envelope-full of money.

To make life more jolly, I was sharing a room with another guy, a total stranger from Croatia or similar. What I like about such arrangements is that you get to meet the most unlikely people in the most unlikely of places and get to rub along together just fine. Anyway, I only had his company for one night, then had the room to myself. As my stay stretched out to a week, I had the good fortune to get a room to myself for about \$US4 per day. I did have to go upstairs and through a very long corridor to get to the showers and toilets. The showers, as was now apparently the case everywhere, had hot water for a very limited time, at a barely-tolerable temperature, with a pretty pathetic flow. However, it was just warm enough and wet enough to be a bit of a pleasure after four days without a wash.

Downstairs was a Nepalese restaurant. This turned out to be a real pleasure, as I relaxed every morning until ten-ish, sipping coffee, eating toast and muesli and writing on my computer. Outside was a quite busy street which I later found was access to the Jokhang, the number one Tibetan Buddhist temple anywhere. I would sit and consume my breakfast then usually completely forget to pay when I left. The owner had conniptions about this, though while my car was parked outside he was usually quite laid-back. When I was about to drive off, however, he would rush out and demand payment, as was reasonable.

All around was the “Old City” of Lhasa. I use the quotes because not much of it was old: in fact the buildings, the pavement and practically every other aspect were very new, but at



Tibetan style, Chinese characters

least its architecture was in Tibetan style, even if covered in signs in Chinese writing. Since “Liberation”, the Tibetans prefer to put up signs in Chinese and explain what it says to the locals in Tibetan written with small characters. Every sign, everywhere, makes sure that people understand that the number one language is Chinese. This is what the Dalai Lama means by “cultural genocide.”

Indeed, in quite a few localities, English was the number two language. Hotels, banks and particularly the post office would have everything signed in Chinese and English, but were liberated from the need to do anything in Tibetan. A liberated Tibetan would not be frustrated by having to transact his business in Chinese or English.

I went for long walks around the Old City, getting a feel for the people and architecture of the place. In places there were colourful markets, one of them being a vegetable market. Not that I had much use for it just at the moment, what with living in a hotel room and frequenting restaurants morning, noon and night.



**Tibetan style without Chinese characters**

It was not difficult to find the Jokhang, being just down the street and facing a substantial square: the Barkhor. In the square and close to the Jokhang were some stele, inscribed in 822 in Tibetan and Chinese, committing both countries to a mutual recognition of their borders. It is behind a fence, concealed from the prying eyes of the public. My main objective, however, was the Jokhang and the walk around it, a walk that has to be undertaken in a clockwise direction or else you suffer seven years' bad luck. I circumambulated the building, then stopped to admire the pilgrims at the front.



## Around Lhasa

These people might have prostrated themselves every five metres along thousands of kilometres of rough and unpleasant road, to get to this place.



**periambulating the Jokhang**

Now one thing I have to admit was that before I turned up in Lhasa, I had never heard of the Jokhang. I had learned of it only because, once in Lhasa, I needed things to do and this was nearby. Before going to Tibet, I would have to say that I knew very little about the place.



**pilgrims prostrating themselves at the Jokhang**

The devotion of the pilgrims was particularly touching, especially when you think that some of them may have travelled thousands of kilometres prostrating themselves the same way. I had seen a few here and there in



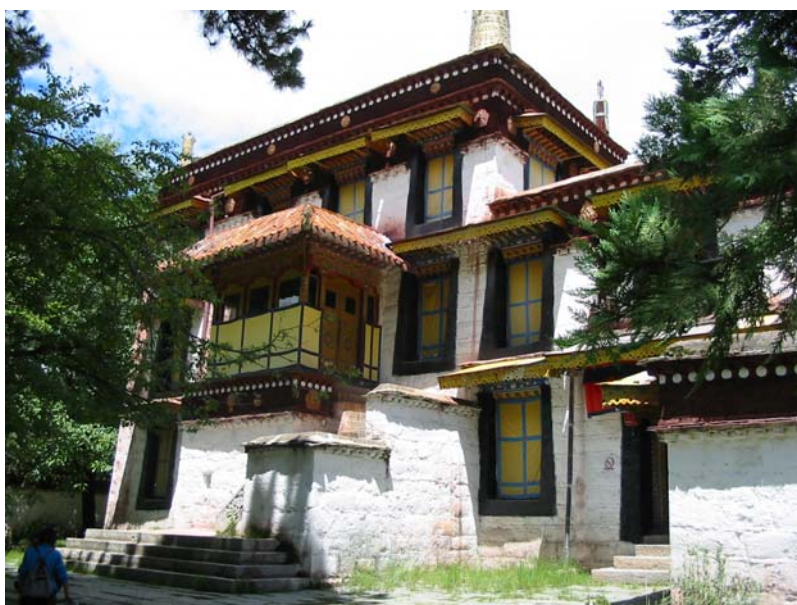
Sichuan Province and here they were, doing the same. I paid to go into the temple, but photography was prohibited indoors. I could, however, take pictures in the courtyard and on the roof, the latter being covered with roof repair people and gold leaf. The abbot had a fine balcony, looking over the courtyard, the golden roof and far beyond to the Potala Palace.

The circuit around the Jokhang contains a large market, mostly filled with the sort of junk poor people would want in their homes – cheap pots, cheap crockery, cheap ornaments, plastic flowers, garish clothing and garish furniture. I was looking for something else, something not made in a factory in Guangdong. I had to look quite hard before coming across a Tibetan silver coin. Unlike most of the coins on display, this one was not fake and not Chinese and the asking price was 20 yuan. I tried to beat him down, but the seller would not budge. He knew I wanted it.

Another stall had something even more fascinating. Ornamented with inlaid silver and turquoise, were several human skulls. Not the complete skull mind you, but the cranium above about eye-level, neatly sawn off so as you handled it and turned it over, you could admire all the interior crenulations where once rested someone's brain. I held this in awe, amazed that human remains could be sold in a market. I did not even think to ask the price, supposing that such an unusual and ornately-decorated object would be very expensive. Nor could I imagine how I could legally take such an object out of China, not to speak of the problems with the Australian Quarantine Inspection Service.

## Min

One of Joe's students was from Lhasa. I might never have known, except that he had a postcard of the place, which he had told me was from a student when she went home to see her parents. Not knowing a soul in the city, I thought it worthwhile to see if I could make contact. Joshua sent me her mobile phone number and I called her.



Summer palace of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama

## Around Lhasa

Min was studying English at the Chengdu University of Technology, where she was in first year. When I sent a text, her response was quick and positive, so soon things were in train to meet her and her parents. She might have come to visit me at the hotel, but as LP only gave the Tibetan name of the street and she only knew the place by Chinese names, she could not find me. Nor did she know anything of the Jokhang and the hotel name was unfamiliar to her. She gave me verbal instructions on how to get to her home from the Potala Palace, only to find myself about 200 metres from the hotel. He Min is Han (Chinese), does not read, write or speak Tibetan and has no idea of the Tibetan placenames of the country.

Finding the block, I went upstairs in a very ugly, brown-stained building. Everything about it was extremely basic: the stairways were filthy concrete, the door of their flat was dirty and unpainted, while inside it was cramped, cluttered and filthy. They had invited me to dinner. This was a very simple noodle dish, with a limited amount of green vegetables, an egg and broth. Plainly her family lived in very straitened circumstances, even so far as having four people sleeping in a tiny space in bunk beds. When I needed to go to the toilet, I was shown down the passageway.

The communal toilets were a marvel to behold, comprising a disgusting urinal and open and very public areas to squat and have a shit. When I asked the age of the building, I was told it had been built ten years earlier (ie 1992). Before that, they had lived in far worse surroundings and it would be a long time before they could expect to get anything better. The family had moved to Tibet from Sichuan because it offered more money and an opportunity for advancement. Min's mother had a business, making Tibetan-style clothing.

After the meal, they wanted to show me around Lhasa. Their idea was to go for a walk in the shopping mall, down to the Lhasa Department Store. This I thought might be useful for obtaining such Western delicacies as milk, Milo, coffee and muesli, so bore it in mind for a later visit. Nearby was the local army base, with an officer on the street to control traffic in the vicinity.



**Lhasa Department Store with plastic palms and Potala Palace**

## Around Lhasa

Outside the Lhasa Department Store was an apparition such as are considered normal, even desirable in Chinese cities. There was a plastic fluoro neon iridescent palm trees, such as are native to China. Above is the Lhasa Department Store, the palm tree, typical elegant Chinese street lighting, and in the distance, the World Heritage Listed Potala Palace.

The next day, Min's mother wanted to take us to the Nobulingka Palace. This was the Summer Home of the Dalai Lamas, entry available to Tibetans for two yuan, but for Chinese and foreigners, it was 45 yuan. I thought this entirely appropriate, especially as her mother was kind enough to pay. I am not sure that they had ever visited the place.

Mostly, the summer residences were a bit boring, but one thing particularly struck me. The home of the fourteenth Dalai Lama (the present one, Tenzin Gyatso) had a quite modern interior and particularly, a shiny, western bathroom. The fittings were of British origin. It is amazing to consider the difficulties that must have been in the way of the materials getting from London to Lhasa. Considerable difficulties.

The personal possessions of the thirteenth Dalai Lama were also on display. I had rather hoped to see his car and movie projector, both of which received honourable mention in "Seven Years in Tibet", but they were nowhere in evidence.



**Charles outside the Dalai Lama's summer residence at Nobulingka**

The Dalai Lama, during his years in Tibet before exile, found the Potala Palace to be something of a prison and much preferred the Nobulingka. Unlike the Palace, this complex had gardens, trees, sunshine and light. Yes, I can quite see why he would have preferred the Nobulingka. Nowhere was the



Chinese army's siege of the place mentioned, nor that 30,000 people surrounded it to protect the Dalai Lama, nor that he escaped in the uniform of a simple soldier over hundreds of kilometres of very high mountains indeed, to the safety of India.

Near the gateway were some of the servant's quarters. These are still occupied by staff and are a stark contrast with the various Dalai Lamas' palaces. They are small, simple but quite beautiful in their own way. It might be said in defence of the various summer palaces that their scale is rather more modest than the palaces of European or Asian royalty.



**Servant's quarters at Potala Palace**

With the visit to the Nobilungka finished, I drove Min and her mother home. After that visit, I did not see them again, partially because of my embarrassment about an issue. Though they lived in the most deprived conditions, they had insisted on paying for the visit to the Nobulingka when really it would not have been a problem for me.

### **Marais and the Sera Monastery**

During my morning breakfasts, I met a Dutch woman who had plans to visit a monastery some kilometres north of the city centre. In discussing this, I proposed that she accompany me there, saving her the hassle of bus and also providing some company.

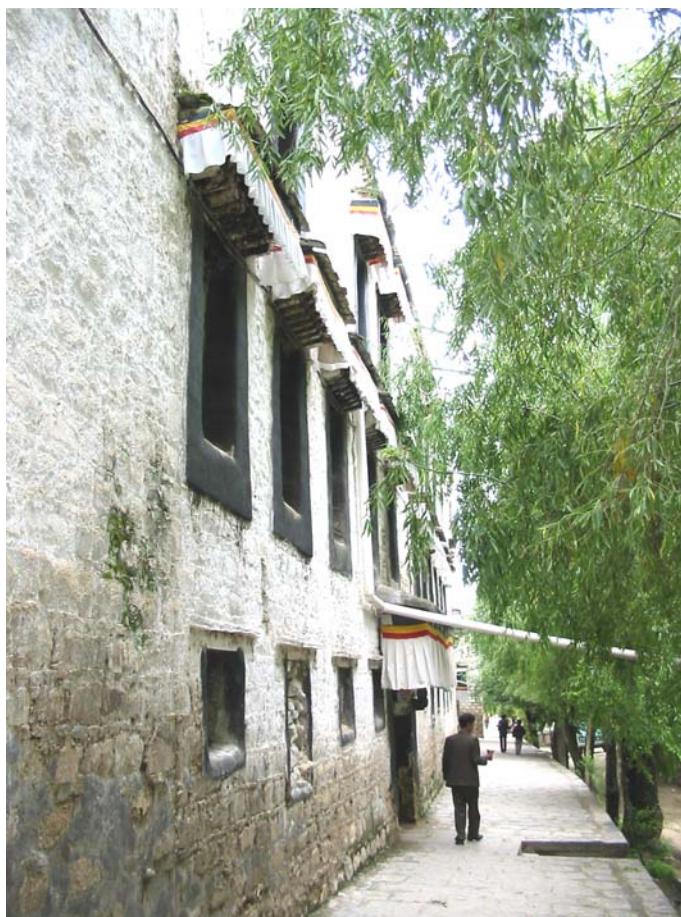
Marais was a Dutch citizen, but as is so commonly the case, of mixed race. She had angular Caucasian features yet the hair and eye colouring of her part-African mother. As is also so commonly the case with the Dutch, she was polylingual and had thought nothing of picking up some Tibetan during several visits to Tibet and neighbouring Nepal.



The route to Sera Monastery was a very simple affair – turn right off Beijing Lu, and head north for about four kilometres. The road terminated outside the monastery.

As is the case with all of these religious sites in Lhasa, there was a fee for entry and a hefty charge if you wanted to use a camera inside the temples. There was no restriction on use of a camera outdoors, but the most extortionate charge is for video. Use of these inside temple buildings attracted a charge of about 1500RMB. I cannot imagine how this fee was justified, except perhaps that the authorities supposed that only television stations would own a video camera.

Entering the grounds, we were welcomed by a labyrinth of alleyways and whitewashed buildings, the windows shaded with the characteristic outdoor hangings of blue, gold, red and white. Here and there were splashes of colour, of geraniums and marigolds.



Marais and I wandered here and there in the monastery, its temples and gardens for several hours. She was a devotee of Tibetan Buddhism, performing rituals at various locations while I felt a bit of an onlooker. One of these rituals was the spinning of prayer wheels, a practice I found rather curious but which achieves a considerable amount of good karma, so they say.

## Around Lhasa

In subsequent years, I have become something of a devotee of the prayer wheels, spinning them whenever I come to a Tibetan monastery.



Many of the buildings are quarters for the hundreds, even thousands of monks residing there. Some had signs in English to tell us that the building and its courtyard were private, but others were open to visitors and made us feel welcome. We were struck by the friendliness of the monks, who, even though communication was impossible, were pleased to sit together with us in their courtyard gardens, among the flowers, in the sunshine, and feel the peace.



**Solar kettle in courtyard with marigolds, cosmos and hollyhocks**

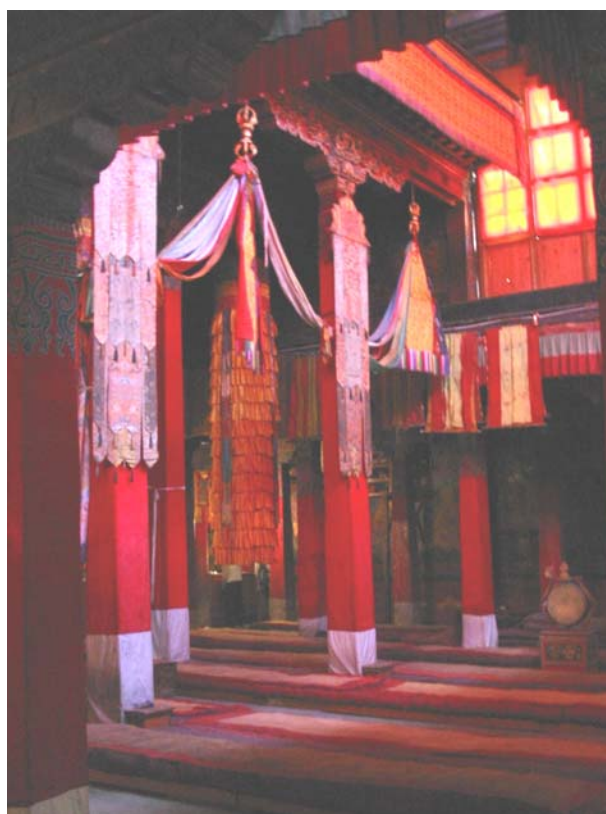
One of these courtyards was occupied by several elderly monks, who were waiting for the kettle to boil. Now, in the normal way of things, waiting for a kettle to boil would be a fairly short-term experience, but in Lhasa this is a different matter. The kettles were solar powered, sitting at the focal point of an aluminised reflector of maybe a square metre in area. At high altitude and with clear skies, the mid-summer sun brought the kettles to boil in due course.



Indeed, there were a number of these installations scattered around the courtyard and the elderly monk made us each a cup of tea.



**Morning tea with a monk**



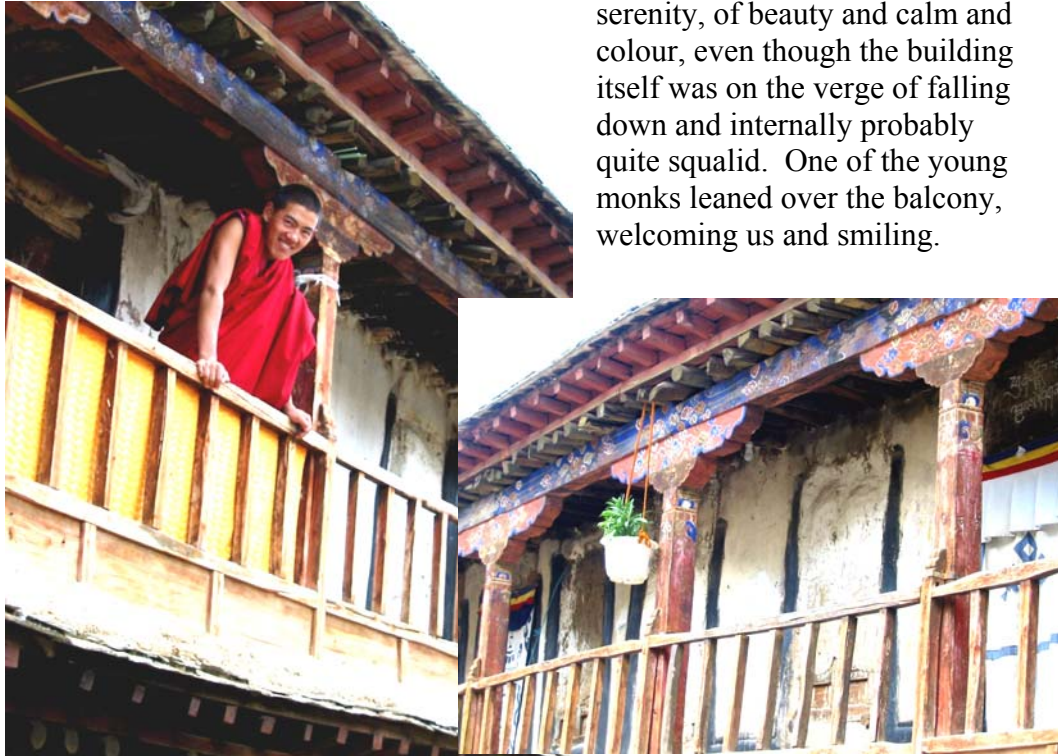
The visit would not have been complete without a peek into the temple, or one of them at least. There were many. Marais had no reservations whatsoever about photographing the interior, so I rather cautiously took a snap. The attraction was the hangings, the colour and many, many golden Buddhas. In fact, the many “Buddhas” were representations of dozens of generations of revered monks, long dead but now celebrated with a statue. They all looked remarkably similar, though close inspection shows that each face has a different personality.

High up the mountainside lay the Hermitage. Hermitages are occupied by hermits and in Tibetan Buddhism, there is special karma to be had from sitting by yourself, facing a wall and meditating, for years on end without any human contact. The hermit’s hair grows, fingernails grow, toenails grow and he gets incredibly filthy. There is no human contact, though miserable quantities of food are delivered occasionally. Finally, after years of sitting, looking at

nothing, thinking of nothing, the monk has completed his sentence, and emerges to join the real world.

Another courtyard was open, this time for a building housing rather younger monks. The perimeter was stacked three stories high with dilapidated verandahs, the bright paint peeling, laundry hanging out to dry and occasional monks who would call out “Hello!” The feeling was of overpowering

serenity, of beauty and calm and colour, even though the building itself was on the verge of falling down and internally probably quite squalid. One of the young monks leaned over the balcony, welcoming us and smiling.



Why are these monasteries so popular? How is it that so many young men choose this life rather than the path of career, money and family?

One of the difficulties during my stay in Lhasa had been the weather. On most days for the past week, it had rained, sometimes quite heavily. Given such miserable weather, it was an attractive proposition to hang out in the city and appreciate what was available indoors. Even the Potala Palace filled this criterion.

## **Potala Palace**

Of course, no visit to Lhasa would be complete without visiting the palace. It totally dominates the skyline and is one of the most famous buildings in the world. It must rise up over a hundred metres and looks down upon the city centre. It was from here that the young Dalai Lama, equipped with a telescope from his predecessor's possessions, spied Heinrich Harrer in the streets of Lhasa sometime during the Second World War. Having seen him in the streets below, the Dalai Lama wanted to meet the man.



Unlike Heinrich Harrer, or indeed most Western visitors, I approached the palace at the wheel of my little van. I drove into the carpark (for there is a visitors' carpark), found a space between the tour buses, paid the two yuan parking fee, then started on my walk up to the palace.

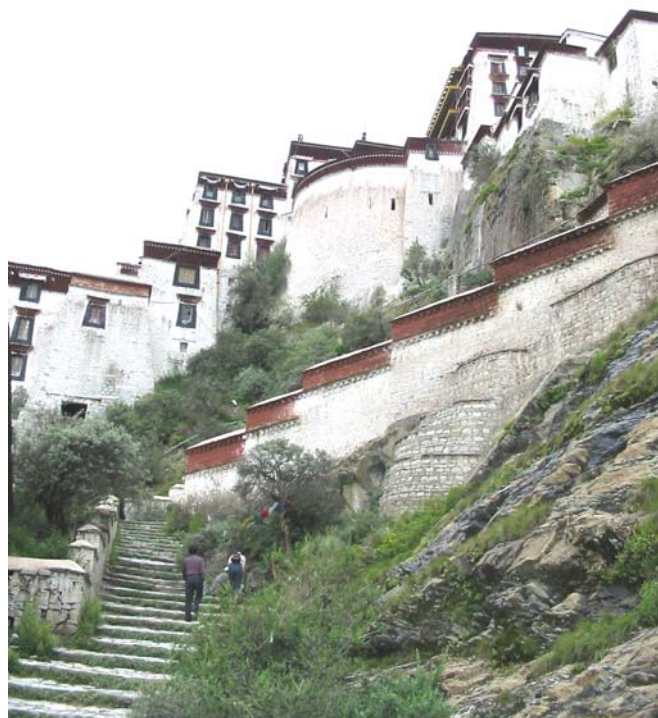
Lhasa stands at an altitude of 3600 metres. For many people, just being at this altitude could be a problem. The many difficulties of altitude sickness include headaches and dizziness. More extreme cases can result in death, but not at 3600m. As for me, I had had no problems thus far. The palace, however, is approached by climbing a very long flight of steps, up past dozens of stalls selling souvenirs, up ever more stairs and finally entering the hallowed portals. The only difficulty was that I got puffed out, very much so. I stopped and looked back.



It was striking how many stalls there were on the way up. Literally dozens of places were selling all sorts of tawdry stuff, plastic crap designed for the lowest common denominator. I had found it very easy to pass them by without spending a cent, not wanting to burden myself with something which I would find a mere embarrassment in the not-too-distant future. Now, however, I was pretty well alone. I looked at the steps in front and had a long way to go. "How do other visitors get here?" I asked myself. You would think that there would be hordes of tourists traipsing up to the main entrance but few were in evidence.

There was still quite a way to go. I plucked up some energy and continued up the stairs, stopping every twenty or so for a breather. This was an exhausting business.

At the top was the cashier, seeking seventy yuan for entry and a bit more if I wanted to see the Yellow Courtyard. Having come so far to see this building, I was not about to argue, even if the fee seemed excessive.



stairs up to Potala Palace

No photography was permitted inside. There were many rooms to see, mandalas of various sorts to appreciate, tombs of the various Dalai Lamas to admire, courtyards to stop and appreciate and temples to walk around in, clockwise. No mention was made of the current (14<sup>th</sup>) Dalai Lama or his exile in India for nearly fifty years.

The Fifth Dalai Lama was celebrated in a fitting manner, however. The tombs of many of the Dalai Lamas were open to the public and the most magnificent of these was that of the Fifth. It was built of solid gold, some 3700 kg of it. So too, were the tombs of Dalai Lamas 1- 4 and 6 – 13. Well, I say this a little inaccurately. Some of them were apparently missing and at least one of the DLs (the sixth?) found life in the Potala Palace far too boring, choosing instead to hang out in bars and brothels in the city below. Until, that is, he met an untimely end in the companionship of the Chinese. Indeed, this behaviour is entirely unsurprising when you get stuck with a job from birth that quite possibly you did not want or to which you were temperamentally unsuited.

Mandalas are pretty patterns designed with the use of coloured sand. They seem to be a bit of a specialty of Tibetan Buddhism, with monks going to great lengths to design and then construct them. This involves working out exactly how much coloured sand ends up at every position on the display board, no mean feat I am sure. There were also solid mandalas.

The solid mandalas were three-dimensional geometric constructions, rather reminiscent of scale models of buildings, particularly temples. Generally they were made of copper and gold-plated, inlaid with gems and covered in cobwebs. Well, no quite, but much of the gold leaf had peeled off, as the items had been sitting there for hundreds of years.

The interiors seemed a very limited subset of what really existed in the Palace. There was no showing and telling us where DL 14 had lived, poking his telescope out the window and observing life in the streets of the city below. There was no mention at all of anything related to the twentieth century really, a typically Chinese amnesia about their history. Probably deep in their hearts, they know they are wrong and do not want to hear anything about it. The authorities do not give them the opportunity to discuss the issue, that is for sure.

After all the fusty interiors, which were nice but poorly explained and not having any pictures does not help with memories, I was out in the bright sunshine. There was a view over the city, with Potala Square in the foreground, the Old City on the left and in the distance, the Tsangpo River. Thousands of kilometres later, this river is the Brahmaputra, flowing past the city of Dhaka in Bangladesh. Photography was permitted here. It is not at all clear why it was forbidden inside: maybe something to do with preserving the art, though to say it was forbidden is not quite the truth. You could take photos and video if you paid a substantial fee. A video permit cost thousands,

but even the photography permit was over a hundred yuan. After the rip-off entry fee, I did not feel like adding to the pain.



**Potala Square from Potala Palace, with the "Liberation" monument and beyond that, the white multistoried buildings of the army headquarters**

The view over Potala Square is all new. Indeed, apparently only 3% of the structures extant in 1950 remain. Even as I visited, a large new police headquarters was under construction in Beijing Lu, just down the street from the Potala Palace. Occupying an entire city block, the building is thirteen stories high. This reflects Chinese paranoia about losing Tibet, that they need a police HQ an order of magnitude larger than in any equivalent city worldwide. Lhasa has a population of about a quarter of a million, but has a police station as big as you might find in a very big city, maybe bigger than you find even in major Chinese cities.

The army, however, is even closer. Just over the other side of the square, snuggled in behind the "Liberation Monument", is the army base. Its many troops are thus very handy to any disperse or dispose of any restless and disloyal Tibetans without having to jog too far with their AK-47s. It is unlikely that this is the only army base in Lhasa, either.

I was on the balcony of the Yellow Courtyard and even though over forty years had passed since the Dalai Lama had lived here, it had been kept in good condition. Maybe it had been rebuilt. Everything that could be chrome yellow was chrome yellow, the curtains, the roof, the balcony, the facades, whatever. The result was stunning. If any other nationality did a building in this colour, it would look hideous. I can think of Dick Smith Electronics in Australia and Pack 'n' Save in New Zealand with their ghastly yellow colour schemes. The Yellow Courtyard is truly amazing.



## Around Lhasa



**The Yellow Courtyard of the Potala Palace**

Just in case you think that yellow might be the standard colour of Tibetan Buddhism, I hasten to add that there is a White Palace (below left) and a Red Palace (below right) within the complex.



Very strangely, photography is quite acceptable here, with the vast majority of tourist lookenpeepers actually being Chinese. Ordinary Chinese have a fascination with Tibet just as profound as that in the West, maybe part of the explanation as to why they want so much to hang onto the place. The other very likely explanation lies in all those tonnes of gold in the tombs of the Dalai Lamas and on the roofs of the temples, palaces and monasteries. Tibet must have lots of gold.



After an afternoon of exploring the Potala Palace, it was time to leave. It was at this time that I discovered the rear exit, also serving as the rear entry for passenger vehicles. I could have driven up to the back door and parked, as the Chinese do, and saved myself a lot of huffing and puffing. The downside of this is that these lazy good-for-nothing vehicle-bound joyriders do not get to appreciate the view over the city as they climb. So I went out the back door, to meet a monk who spoke English and engaged me in a pleasant enough chat, asking all the usual questions about where I came from and how I feel about China and so on. "I love China and I hate China," I replied. I do not think I caused offence. As I left, he told me that an envelope-full of cash was clearly visible in my left pocket.

That I had an envelope filled with cash was not a surprise. I carried this in the car, in a simple location which I could easily check without being obvious about it. I did not, however, leave the cash in the car, lest someone get the idea of breaking in and looking for valuables. Being far from a cash machine, loss of most of my money could be a real problem. But I did not think that the envelope in my left pocket was obviously full of money. When I checked, sure enough, it was frayed enough to reveal a thick wad of 100 yuan notes. I decided to be more careful thereafter.

One reason I prefer to have my own car is that it is more secure. Public transport leaves you at the mercy of all sorts of gangsters, people who ply the buses and particularly trains as a full-time job, stealing as much as possible from every sucker they find. So far as I am aware, there is not yet a problem with car-jackings and the like. It helps that there are few privately-owned weapons in China.

I walked out the back way, around the front, picked up my little van and was off to do other things. One of those things was to visit the Lhasa Department Store, to see if I could buy any Western foods that I have been unable to do without: milk, Milo, bread and muesli (or indeed, any breakfast cereal) being some of the items. Regrettably, the Lhasa Department Store sold a huge range of confectionery and snacks, biscuits of many types, Chinese tea and all sorts of other goodies appealing to Chinese tastes, but nothing I wanted. There was no milk, no Milo, no wholemeal bread and certainly no muesli. I left the store empty-handed.

Though I had my own laptop computer, I nevertheless had to visit internet cafes to catch up on my email. There was one right opposite the hotel, of which I was a daily client. On one of these days, there were two other people present while I was working on my correspondence. One of them was a German male of about fifty, the other a Tibetan girl of maybe twenty. She was trying to find a website to post her details, in the hope of finding herself a foreign husband. She asked the German for suggestions as to which websites might be suitable and he asked her why.

"I have come back from India, where I was educated and can speak English and Tibetan. All employment, however, requires that I be fluent in Chinese.

## Around Lhasa

It is impossible for me to learn that and my only hope for the future is to get out of the country. The only way I can leave is to find a foreign husband.”

Later I learned that the situation of Tibetan women is so desperate that there is an industry where they marry foreign men to get out. I did not offer my services, however, thinking this the worst possible basis for a relationship.

My car was in need of some work. It had done twelve thousand kilometres since new and was due for a major service, but where was there a Wuling agency? I drove up and down the main drag of Lhasa a couple of times, looking for the tell-tale sign but finding every brand but Wuling. I found one shop that sold Wuling spares, but did not have service facilities. All of this was a bit of a struggle, none of the proprietors in any of the businesses speaking English and me not speaking Chinese or Tibetan. Then I saw “Lhasa Toyota”, a large sign in English, and thought they might have someone who could at least speak English and point me in the right direction.

“Can I help you?” the receptionist asked me as I walked into the immaculate, marble-floored vehicle showroom and foyer. She was an equally-immaculate young woman, dressed in quite a formal suit, with a tie, high heels, makeup and altogether a bit too glossy for a car place.

“I am looking for a Wuling agent to do a service on my car,” I told her. Somehow I felt a bit out of place, scruffily-dressed and driving a mere Wuling, not one of their very shiny black Lexus’s that disported themselves in the showroom; beautiful black, unroaded tyres on their hundreds of square metres of dazzling marble.

“Could you wait a minute please?” she asked, disappearing out the back towards the repair shop. Shortly she returned, with a man in overalls in tow. He was quite tidy as well, not like the norm in Chinese workshops, who look as though they have not had a wash, shower or laundered their clothes for some months. He was in a bright blue set of overalls, with Lhasa Toyota emblazoned on his back. He asked me what I wanted and I explained my need.



“There is no Wuling agent in Lhasa, but we can do the work for you here,” he told me. After a brief discussion, he told me that it could be done right away, surprising really, but true. Within a few minutes, the vehicle was up on a stand, the oil drained, all the suspension checked, bolts tightened and the wheels off to repack the bearings. While they were at it, they checked and adjusted the brakes.

“Would you like to join us for lunch, while the work is being done?” he asked. So while a junior mechanic worked on the suspension, brakes and wheel bearings, I was an honoured guest in the staff canteen, where I was treated to a bowl of noodles with egg. “Sorry, but I do not eat meat.”



After I had eaten, I was invited back to the chief mechanic's quarters. These were a room nearby, where he and his wife lived. “Nearby” is something of an understatement: they were on the premises, just behind the workshop, only about twenty metres from his workplace. This is the normal arrangement in China – accommodation is provided by your employer, and usually on-site. Thus all of the workers at this establishment lived just behind the workshops, while all the staff at my university lived a short walk from the lecture rooms. This arrangement saves workers from having to commute, but at the cost of being enclosed within a rather incestuous, even monastic, environment.



**Lhasa Toyota: workers' quarters**

The chief mechanic was trying to read Toyota's service manuals. These were apparently not available in Chinese, at least not for all models. He had learned English at school, but it did not prepare him very well for understanding automotive workshop manuals. This was pretty well his sole English document, rather reminding me of when I was staying in Japan in 1990. I was at a house where the only English reading was a Boeing 747 Flight Engineer's manual. Such tomes have one advantage: it is easy to get to sleep after twenty or thirty pages. After a cup of tea, a chat and browsing a Landcruiser service manual, I went back to see how my vehicle was progressing.

"Not at all," was the answer. The junior mechanic was dealing with some more urgent need than mine. After a while, he and the chief mechanic got back to work on my vehicle and while they worked, I looked around the place. They had a panel shop that seemed far busier than the mechanical section. For every car being serviced, there were about four having panel work. This seemed a bit imbalanced, but indeed was an observation I made a number of times during my travels in China. It was almost as though every car in China had several panel-and-paint jobs for each oil change.

One of the vehicles was particularly sad. I felt that way because it was a Toyota HiAce van which had been rolled and written off. When I looked at the speedometer, it had done just eighteen kilometres. "This car has had a short life," I commented, to which the chief mechanic responded that it had not even been delivered to the client before being rolled. Apparently one of the staff had taken it for a joyride and destroyed it. He emphasized that this sort of thing was not uncommon in China.

Shortly the work was finished and the car was ready for further adventures. Now all that had to happen was for some sunny weather to arrive. I was not interested in camping while the incessant rain of the past few days continued. Not wanting to travel entirely by myself, I posted a little notice in a few backpacker places, offering a place in my van in exchange for a share of the expenses. It would have been nice if Marais would join me on this trip, but she had disappeared from the scene.

"Hello Charles!" A woman came up to me and I recognized Chong Che, the Korean whom I had met in Golmud, and had passed me in a police Jeep. Upon enquiry, she told me that it had been a fake police car driven by a fake policeman in a fake uniform, running a highly-illegal taxi service for foreigners into Tibet. This was a neat way to avoid the cost of a permit.

The sunny weather arrived. After doing the Jokhang, Nobulingka, Potala Palace and the Sera Monastery, I was monasteried-out. I wanted to do something different and, reading the trusty LP, the most striking alternative was to visit the Everest Base Camp, some four hundred kilometres away. Before leaving, I had to buy some provisions, the best place being in the Old City markets, just a few hundred metres away. I went for a walk with a shopping bag and, while purchasing some green vegetables my mobile phone rang. It was an American who wanted to share a trip to Mount Everest. His name was Daryl and he was quite prepared to travel that day.



## The Friendship Highway

As I walked back to my hotel to meet Daryl, I passed Barkhor Square and the Jokhang again. This time, I looked around for the copy of the 822AD treaty between China and Tibet, finding it somewhat skilfully preserved. “Hidden” is maybe the word.



**Sino-Tibetan treaty of 822AD and curious onlooker**

I have only Lonely Planet’s word that what I saw was the text of a treaty. Whatever, a tall and venerable pillar of stone stood in the square, surrounded by a wall so that no-one could really see, touch or read it. I suppose it was inscribed in Chinese and Tibetan and you would think that such a document would be worthy of some comment. Absolutely nothing was said. It just stood there, mute, unacknowledged and surrounded by a wall.

Stopping at the monument, I attempted to peek at it through a small hole. The hole was not big enough to see much text and with its great age, exposure to the weather and lack of care, there was nothing much to see. Some study by scholars familiar with Tibetan and Chinese texts of the era might be able to sort it out. I cannot. Whatever, it is a treaty that the Chinese have absolutely no intention of honouring, the standard Chinese attitude being that agreements, contracts and treaties are just words to be abrogated whenever it is convenient or profitable to do so.

The 822 AD treaty was made after the Tibetans invaded China and occupied the then capital of Xian. After the treaty was agreed, they packed up and returned whence they came, leaving a copy in Xian and taking one back to Lhasa. You have to wonder why the Tibetans had done this and the only rational explanation I can think of was that the Chinese were intruding into their space. If a country invades you, one way of dealing with the problem is to retaliate, occupy their capital and give them no choice but to sign a treaty, desisting from further incursions. Maybe the people of Tibet need to occupy Beijing, take the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party into custody and coerce them into recognising Tibetan sovereignty.

A few minutes later, I met Daryl at the hotel and had a brief discussion about the merits of driving to Everest Base Camp (the Chinese one) and sharing of costs on the journey. He was quite happy to make an immediate departure and

## The Friendship Highway

that was what we did. He did not have much baggage while I was fully equipped and had been prepared to leave that day, anyway.

The drive out of Lhasa was along the same route as that had brought me into the city. For some twelve kilometres, there was a parade of shop-fronts and apartment blocks, everything in concrete and mostly ornamented with white bathroom tiles as is the fashion in China. Gradually, the built environment gave way to the countryside and we passed through extensive fields planted with barley, while the road was lined with beautiful deciduous trees in full leaf. In the distance were the rolling mountains that defined the Tsangpo Valley and reminded us that we were in Tibet.

For the first hundred kilometres, the condition of the road was excellent. This was in some way related to the fact that Lhasa International Airport is about 100km west of the city and connected by a modern highway. Light traffic of trucks, buses and cars came towards us and the travel was entirely pleasant. Were it that the journey was as comfortable the whole way.

Once past the airport turnoff, the road quality rapidly declined. The road was still sealed, but only partially. It was sealed where there were no potholes, but potholes were more than just numerous. They occupied maybe a quarter or more of the road's surface area, so the ride became rather lumpy, amazingly lumpy really. I had to slow down quite dramatically, from the ninety-odd that is my usual style to maybe fifty. I swerved from left to right and back again, all the time trying to avoid the worst holes and keep my wheels on bitumen. Inevitably, however, there was a lot of bumping as we went along. You could hope that sometime the road will get better, but that was wishful thinking really. If these potholes had been caught when they were small and instantly repaired, the road could still be quite reasonable. This, however, is not the Chinese way of doing things. Rather than make a minor repair, they let it go until the situation is irremediable without ripping out the entire road and rebuilding it from scratch.

A piece of rope was stretched across the road, tended by a policeman sleeping in the shade of an umbrella. I could not just drive through without disturbing him, as the rope was attached to something, maybe his big toe. I stopped, dug out my documents and woke the dozing cop. He had a look at my passport, my alien residence permit, my driver's license, vehicle registration, road tax, insurance and waved me through. The lack of Tibet Tourist Permit did not in any way trouble him. We would, however, have to get a suitable permit from the Shigatse Police before proceeding to Mt Everest. That was some time later, maybe the following day.

Out in the countryside again, we followed the increasingly shabby road along the mountain valley. It degraded to just a pair of wheel ruts in the mud and stone and sand, avoided a bridge for whatever reason and wended its way down to a ford, where we splashed through a creek. After a few kilometres of winding around on this red, muddy track on an alluvial fan high above the Tsangpo, we came to a parked bus.

## The Friendship Highway



The passengers were out smoking, looking at the scenery, sneaking off for a wee behind a rock, or taking photographs. We stopped too, asking what was the story, to be told : “The road is broken.” The bus had stopped where it was, a long way from the tail-end of the queue and in a position to execute a U-turn, should that become necessary. There was no oncoming traffic – a bad sign – and a long line of vehicles visible in the distance.

Unlike the bus, we could execute U-turns if really necessary. After we each had a wee behind a rock, Daryl and I proceeded with caution to the traffic jam some distance ahead.

Several dozen vehicles were stalled on our side and a similar number were waiting to come through the other way. In the middle of this was a road awash with mud and rocks, with a small crew of men leaning on their shovels but not doing much. The rain I had experienced over the last few days was part of the monsoon which had precipitated a debris flow down the mountainside and over the road. A machine was expected some time to rectify the problem and until then, we had to wait. Being set up to camp, this seemed no great drama: we could simply get out the tent and so on and so forth and simply overnight beside the road. We sat in the car for a while and waited, then decided to get out and admire the view (it was a quite spectacular valley) from the comfort of our easy chairs.

The wait became quite protracted. Daryl and I acquired a collection of onlookers, some being young, female and Chinese. They were on a tour somewhere and found two Western males too difficult to ignore. A couple of these women actually were television journalists, and when you are in a place illegally they may be good people to avoid.



## The Friendship Highway



**Busybody Chinese tourist photographing the masticating Daryl.**

However, excessive avoidance might raise their curiosity, something we did not need at the moment. We did indulge them though, as some seemed to have some English. The only difficulty was that I did not feel particularly positive about the Chinese, given what I had seen along the way. I smiled for their cameras and they were rewarded with photographs of friendly Western males to show off to their family and friends back in Beijing or wherever.



The delay was lengthy, time was getting on and we felt hungry. The thing to do was to make dinner: why not? We had all the necessities: gas stove, pots, table, cutting board, knife, spatula and most importantly, a range of foodstuffs



in boxes and my little refrigerator. We pulled out all of this and more, set up on the bank beside the van, and started chopping. The group of onlookers became curiouser and curiouser, a bit amazed that people could and did travel like this, complete with picnic chairs.

Of course, all of this reversed the usual tourist-versus-local interaction and I am sure many of the people appreciated the irony. We did tire a bit of the attention after an hour and gradually the sightseers wandered off to their buses. The long queue was starting to move.

Quite quickly, it was my turn. The long wait for a machine had been in vain, and basically we were to make our way through the slush, water, mud and concealed rocks as best we could. As quite a few buses and trucks had passed that way before it was my turn, it was a seriously churned-up mud-patch with quite inadequate clearance for the little Wuling van. Rather than get stuck in the mud halfway, I negotiated with the 4WD in front of me to tow me through. If I got stuck, it would cause a huge inconvenience while I was extricated from the mess. A 4WD tow in time saves a lot of problems.

The 4WD in front took off, dragging me immediately behind him. He went rather fast, through lots of mud and I heard many rocks clattering against the underside of my vehicle. Hopefully there would be no serious damage. I struggled to keep my wheels on the higher bits, my engine strained, I slid sideways here and there, the mud seemed forever impossible, the clattering continued and finally I was pulled out the other side. I thanked the driver profusely for towing me through, detached the tow cable and we were on our way. I kept a careful eye on the oil pressure light and the temperature gauge. There were no untoward happenings.

The several hours of delay meant that we could not get to Shigatse before sunset. Given the condition of the road, lack of crash barriers or even signs warning of dangerous situations, and our quite reasonable desire to survive the journey, we opted to camp somewhere. A track lead off to the left, probably leading to some open ground where we might set up our tents.

Indeed, there was open ground and also a whole village full of kids. Not all the onlookers were children, as there were a few adults and quite a number of teenage girls. Several of the latter spoke some English and were keen to keep us entertained. Meanwhile, Daryl and I had to put up our tents, dealing with the questions as to where we had come from and where we were going. The girls told me that they had a Canadian teacher of English named Alice.

Daryl had an amazingly small tent. I think “coffin sized” is the sort of dimension that comes to mind, but apparently adequate for one person needing to camp out by himself occasionally. I offered him an air mattress, an offer he accepted with some enthusiasm. Then there was the little question of getting it inflated. Though I had a foot pump, it was incredibly slow and rather prone to dying in the midst of the inflation procedure. For that reason, I had devised an alternative method of inflating air mattresses, using the foot pump hose, but attaching it to the exhaust of the Wuling van. That way, the mattress was

## The Friendship Highway

inflated in all of a minute, an order of magnitude faster than with the foot pump, and with zero effort on my part. I inflated both mattresses. Shortly we had to politely suggest to our curious onlookers that it was time to go to bed and they all politely toddled off, leaving us by ourselves in our tents. This was surely a good thing, because I doubt if any the girls was much older than about fourteen.



“Get up! Get up!” I heard a girlie voice outside my tent. I emerged to find a couple of them anxious for our morning-time company, and the air mattress Daryl had used lying outside his tent. Shortly Daryl obeyed the imperatives issued by the girls, and emerged from his tent. “You didn’t find the mattress comfortable?” I asked him.

“No, not at all. It leaked in the middle of the night and gassed me,” he responded. Well, I had occasionally had the bung eject itself and found myself lying on the hard and usually rocky ground. However, I had got particular about this, making sure that the bung was inserted properly but apparently had not got it right for him. Poor Daryl had been gassed and then spent the rest of the night lying on the rocks.

We had breakfast and packed up, though with a smaller contingent of onlookers than the night before. They showed us to the water so we could brush our teeth, then bid us farewell for our journey. I felt a little sorry that I had to leave, but that is life I guess.

It was still quite a long way to Shigatse. The road continued up the same valley, lined with farms and canola fields, while further away were always the bare, beautiful and quite dramatic mountains. I desperately needed to go to

## The Friendship Highway

the toilet, but all around were just fields full of canola. This would have to be it. I stopped the car, apologising to Daryl by saying: “Sorry, I have to have a crap.” I scooted down to the canola, finding it to be only about knee high but that would have to do. I dug a little hole and suitably fertilised the field, then stopped to take a photograph. Canola goes well with bare grey mountains.

Actually, the mountains and canola fields became a bit repetitive and we found ourselves wondering when on earth Shigatse would ever appear. Shigatse had an office of the so-called Public Security Bureau, which is a euphemism for “Police”. The Shigatse PSB are the people to issue travel permits, required for journeys to Everest and beyond. The office closed for lunch at 1:00pm and reopened at four, so we felt it imperative to get there before midday. Once in the town, we quickly oriented ourselves, found the PSB and went upstairs to the “Foreign Affairs Office.” There were a number of spacious, red velvet sofas and a woman behind the counter.



**Shigatse nestled against the mountains ( viewed from east)**

“You need to book a tour with CITS,” the lady behind the counter told us. Once you have booked with them, we can issue a permit.

“But I do not need a tour,” I objected.

“You need to book a tour with CITS,” she repeated.

“Where is CITS?” Daryl asked.

“It is at the East Wind Hotel,” the woman responded. She could not tell us where the hotel was, but Messrs Planet (Lonely) had thoughtfully indicated its position on a map. This showed it to be on the other side of town.

“Well, we had better get a wriggle on, and go and see what CITS can provide,” I said to Daryl. We went out, jumped in the van, then had a devil of a time reconciling what Messrs Planet had put on paper and what was really on the ground. Not least of the problems was a lack of signs, as few of the

## The Friendship Highway

streets were labelled, nor was the East Wind Hotel. Daryl and I found the premises after almost an hour of searching, complete with a sign to say that CITS had moved, but no indication of where they might have gone. We hightailed it back to the PSB, just in time to catch Ms PSB emerging from the main entrance. She was a bit surprised to see me driving and Daryl as the sole passenger. Upon explanation of the apparent closure of the CITS office, she told us: “Come back at four and I will see what I can do.”

Daryl and I used the three-hour break to catch up with a number of things. He had spent a couple of days in Shigatse previously, so was *au fait* with the best restaurants and particularly, the public bathhouse. Somehow a meal and a shower, plus a bit of wandering around the markets, provided enough entertainment to help the hours go by. At four, we were back at the PSB and Ms PSB gave us her immediate attention. Within the hour, we had permits for ten days’ travel in the Shigatse-to-Everest area. This degree of cooperation is unusual in China and probably even in Shigatse, though they are reported to be more reasonable than most bureaux in China. Maybe having a car, even just a Wuling van, raised the woman’s perception of us. Perhaps she thought we were diplomats or on UN business, or had friends in high places. By five o’clock, we were on the road. She did not ask for a Tibet Tourist Permit.

West of Shigatse, it was a dirt road. I had rather hoped that the bitumen would extend twenty or fifty kilometres out of town, but no such luck. At the very town limits, the dirt was upon us. We would not see any more bitumen to speak of until we returned.

All around were beautiful mountains, lit by intense sunshine and yet decorated by fluffy cumulus cloud. This scenery went on, with interruptions, for several hundred kilometres.



The car was running hot. This was something new and rather surprising. Being only three months old, you would hardly expect cooling system problems, especially as the ambient temperature was probably under twenty



## The Friendship Highway

degrees. After some thought, I realised that the condition was probably in some way related to one of the many muddy pools we had to pass through along the way. Pulling over to the side of the track, Daryl and I got out and looked under the vehicle.

The engine, radiator and tie-rods were protected by a large steel underbody plate, designed to prevent damage to these essential components in the rough conditions of Chinese rural roads. It did, however, have a scoop at the front to help direct air over the radiator, but at a cost. It seemed that when the going got very muddy, as was the case quite frequently, muddy water was scooped in as well. This got onto the radiator fins, caking them up so that air could not pass through and do its job, hence the overheating.

The mud would have to come off, but how? The only thing we could think of was to try and wash it off with water, a supply of which was lying in a nearby pool. Firstly though, the large steel underbody plate had to come off. As it was secured by six substantial bolts, I had to dig out a suitable spanner to do the job, and grovel around under the car in the dust and gravel. Daryl gave a hand and after a bit of a struggle it was off. We tried pouring water over the radiator and we tried scrubbing it with a toothbrush. The latter seemed the more effective tool, but I had to wonder what it would taste like when we had finished with it. After about an hour of slithering around, grunting and cursing under the car, scrubbing near-fruitlessly with my toothbrush, we felt we had removed as much mud as was feasible in the conditions. Then we had to put the plate back on. All of this procedure would have been so much easier if we did not have the plate there, in particular, we would have been easily able to see the problem and easily rectify it. It seemed a self-defeating design feature.

Later we came to where a truck had taken a short-cut off the road, leaping into a void and consequently doing a fair amount of damage to itself and probably the load. I daresay the driver might have sustained an injury or two as well



But how would this accident happen? In daylight, the edge of the road is obvious, but long-distance trucks in China never stop. My informed guess is that the driver was dazzled by headlights and misjudged a road he could not see. Note that there are no crash barriers, nor even little white posts along the

## The Friendship Highway

edge of the road. If you screw up, you go over the edge. The driver was very lucky to have picked a location with such a modest drop. There are many places on this road where he and his truck would drop into the depths of the river, never to be seen again.



**Shepherds by the roadside**

The road never got much better. It was a rough dirt road, particularly uncomfortable to drive on and all we could do was hasten slowly. With all the delays, including hanging around in Shigatse for the permits, and the radiator problem, we only did about 210 kilometres for the day. Our camp was beside the road, near the 5,000km peg. This marked the distance from Beijing. Everything is related to Beijing in Tibet, even if it would make far more sense to have the distances from Lhasa, about 220km away. Our campsite was at 29°07'26"N 88°02'38"E elevation 4215m. It was cold and windy, but I persisted and made an evening meal. Then we went to sleep, there being nothing else to do, certainly no entertaining young girls as on the previous evening.

The next day, we travelled through Latse, refueling on the way. It was always a good idea to fill up, because we had no idea where the stations were. At Latse, I bought a whole nine litres of fuel, costing 32 RMB (about \$US4). There was also a jerry can filled with petrol, just in case no petrol station presented itself. During the day, we crossed two passes, one before Latse at 4526m and another of 5244m at 28°58'08"N 87°26'15"E. As we passed by, we met a couple of shepherds and their flock, set in a boulder field. You have to look closely to see the sheep among the rocks. These boulders persisted under the road, making for an incredibly lumpy surface and uncomfortable ride. The "highway" was like this for forty kilometres.

Shergar was the last town before the turnoff to Everest. It did not have any fuel facility, so from here on in, I would have to make do with the tank and the jerry can. The distances were not huge: just 115 km from Shergar to Everest Base Camp, and another 140 back to Latse. The problem was that the car only had about 30 litres capacity, with another 20 in the jerry can. It would be hard to get additional supplies if we ran out.

What about a permit for the Everest Trail? These were expensive and my experience thus far in Tibet was that I could often overlook the requirement and no-one seemed any the wiser. Daryl and I decided to try and just drive in to the Everest national park without the 465 RMB (about \$US55) permit that was required. Maybe someone would be asleep or the boom gate up, or maybe there would be no-one to check at all. Firstly though, we had to pass through an army checkpoint. We knew about this from our trusty LP guidebook.

## The Friendship Highway

About five kilometres outside Shergar, we were waved off to the side and a man in a green PLA uniform came over and requested our papers. When they were all produced, we then had to go over to the office for processing. Our passport numbers were taken, but really that was about all. They did not want to see permits for the Everest Trail. What was obvious was that Tibetans were given a much harder time by the authorities. Presumably many of them sneak over the border to Nepal, or sneak back from India. In any case, the men in the office were referring to computer records for the Tibetans and seemingly delaying them for some time. Splittists and terrorists would not like this at all.

We went to the head of the queue. The Tibetans had to sit around and wait for their Chinese overlords to process their particulars as an à-la-carte four-course meal, but Western tourists got quick takeaway service. Within a few minutes we were on our way. Somehow I had expected it would take longer. Again, neither of us was asked to produce a Tibet Tourism Permit: indeed, all that was required was the passport. The car did not interest them either.

We were on our way. Only fifteen kilometres down the road, there was the turnoff to Mt Everest. Again, we were on the “Friendship Highway”, perhaps representative of the quality of Chinese friendship. Like the thousands of kilometres of “highway” that had passed before, this was an atrocious rocky dirt track, plied by thousands of trucks and as rough as guts. You would think that if you gave a road such a name, you would make sure it was an excellent road, not a really bad one.

Arriving at the turnoff, there was an unusually clear sign and a group of Western tourists sitting, waiting for something. I stopped to chat, thinking that maybe some of them would want a lift or else we could gain some information. Seldom do you find clear, trilingual signs anywhere in China, let alone far from the centre of things, on the trail to Mount Everest.



Well, no. They were not seeking a lift – they were simply waiting to be picked up by a connecting bus, which would take them to Kathmandu.



## The Friendship Highway



A pony cart passed by. These are quite common in Tibet and I could not help but contemplate the advantages of pony carts over motor transport. Firstly, they are quiet and at the speed they travel, the bumps in the roads are not really a problem. Further, they can forage for their own fuel along the sides of the road, most of which can be obtained for free. Should they suffer some sort of malfunction, this usually repairs itself rather than require a rare and expensive mechanic. Spare parts are not an issue. Finally, they replicate themselves, so that when your old pony is beyond its use-by date, a later model is available to do the same job at no cost.



Of course, I have to concede that there are disadvantages. They do not travel very fast; the pony may be temperamental and it is just possible that it would get sick or die. If it is a gelding, it will not replicate itself, and in the winter you might just have to buy it food. They are a problem at hotels, most of which have no accommodation for ponies. Travel across the length and



## The Friendship Highway

breadth of China by pony would take years. In many cities in China, ponies are banned, so you would not be able to visit the centre of Chengdu, Shanghai, Beijing or Hongkong using pony transport. Also, as you travel, you will be forever facing the animal's anus, with all its attendant entertainments.

It was goodbye time for the people at the turnoff. We had ascertained that there was a proper checkpoint a short distance along the road to Mount Everest, that they had a boom gate and that it was closed. This was going to be a problem. We had not purchased Everest trail permits in Shergar because we thought there was some possibility of no-one checking us, or the person on the checkpoint being in an inattentive state, such as being asleep. We drove up the road and a couple of kilometres further along were faced with the dreaded boom gate. As we pulled up, a man came out of the box and asked to see our permits. "Permits? What permits?" was our disingenuous response.

"You must have a permit for your car and a permit for the passenger," the box-wallah informed me.

"But I have a permit," I responded (showing the Alien Visitor's Permit for which I had paid 50 yuan in Shigatse,) and the man thought me a fool.

"You need an Everest Visitor's Permit," he told me. We sat and waited. Daryl was particularly keen to avoid paying money, as the fee was 65 yuan for him as a passenger. I was even more keen, because I would have to pay 405 yuan. Daryl made it quite clear that he was not prepared to share permit expenses for the car.

A truckload of Tibetan peasants turned up and the boom gate was lifted to allow them to pass. They did not have to pay. I attempted to follow them through but a young man came out and stood in front of my vehicle. They were not going to let us pass, not without running down the young man standing in front of me anyway. "You think you can get away with anything when you are in a foreign country," the gateman said. Well, not quite. I could see a vast problem arising if we forced our way through without his acquiescence. Mostly, I thought we might be able to negotiate some sort of cash settlement rather less than the 470 yuan required by the system. Daryl went off to negotiate with the gateman, then came back and sat on a rock next to the car. He felt that some waiting would resolve the situation.

My own feeling was that the best solution was to go in to Shergar and purchase the appropriate permit. With some difficulty, I turned the car around and drove a hundred or so metres down the track, back towards Shergar, and waited for Daryl to join me. He did not come. After waiting for half an hour, I backed up to the gate and spoke to Daryl. "Aren't you going to wait?" he asked.

## The Friendship Highway

“I think we should go back to Shergar and get a permit before the CITS office there closes.” Daryl agreed to this proposal, climbed aboard, and we made our way back to Shergar, through the army checkpoint, then to the CITS office.

It was not as though there was a sign anywhere saying “CITS”. Shergar was a



motley little village, dominated by a Tibetan pub and a collection of shabby houses. A courtyard development which had more of the appearance of a road worker’s camp than an office building housed CITS, the China International Travel Service. A pig was rifling through the rubbish. We went into an unprepossessing door, one where the glass had not been cleaned for years, nor the paintwork attended to for decades, to find a tiny, cluttered, dirty office with a woman sitting at an ancient wooden desk. This was CITS.

Despite the decrepit appearance, the service was quick, friendly and in rudimentary English. Payment of the required 470 yuan was rewarded with two quite impressive-looking documents, entry permits for the Qomolangma National Park. These were trilingual in Chinese, English and Tibetan, outlining the rules for entry, which forbade shooting the wildlife and thoughtless disposal of rubbish, among other things. Armed with our permits, we departed Shergar and were soon back at the army checkpoint again. No passport presentation was required this time – we were simply waved through.

This time also, I noticed that dozens of Tibetan tents were pitched in the valley to the west of the checkpoint. It looked as though people would get this far, then take a considerable period to get things right with the authorities, long enough that they pitched substantial yak-hair tents for the duration of their wait. Maybe this was the consequence of an unauthorised visit to Nepal or India. The boom-gate-wallah welcomed us back, inspected our newly-acquired tickets and waved us into the Qomolangma National Park.

## The Friendship Highway

Shortly after passing the checkpoint, we started a long and arduous climb up to the Gue-la Pass. Daryl felt that the best views of all were available from here, and indeed part of his pitch to the gateman was that we were only going to the top of the pass. Personally, my intention was to make it all the way to the Qomolangma (this is the Tibetan and Chinese name for Mt Everest) Base



Camp, not just settle for a glimpse from afar. The road was narrow, often washed out, rocky and dusty. It had been rebuilt recently, the previous track having been traversed by Daryl a few years before and it had been quite terrible. Nevertheless, care was required because in places there were long drops if the driver made a mistake. By eight in the evening we were at the top of the pass. In front of us was the spectacular panorama of the High Himalaya as shown above. Unfortunately, the highest peaks, of which three were over 8000 metres, were shrouded in cloud. Though there was still another hour of light, Daryl thought it best to camp here and we might be rewarded with a cloud-free view of everything in the morning. I wandered off and had a look at the obelisk at the top of the pass, to learn that we were camping the night at 5200 metres.

Given that it was quite cold and windy, preparing dinner was a bleak experience. The gas cooker did the job, but I found myself sitting on top of it for warmth while the meal was doing its stuff. And after dinner, we both packed off to bed, hoping to wake to a spectacular view of Everest and its neighbours. During the night I found myself seriously breathless. Again, I found the cure was to open up the tent and let in some fresh air, and go outside and hyperventilate. Even though I had now been at high altitude for nearly a month, sleeping this high was a trial.

The morning came. In these parts, even in summer, the sun rises late because the Chinese do everything by Beijing time. More properly, it is Shanghai time, because Shanghai is on the meridian, and Shanghai is a long, long way east of Mount Everest. The first glimmers of light were about eight. Not that there was any reason to get up. We looked out of our tents and could see nothing but an all-enveloping fog. Maybe it would improve later. I prepared a

## The Friendship Highway

cup of coffee for us and we sat down to enjoy the view when it came, but instead we got quite cold. Daryl was emphatic that we should wait for the fog to lift, the sun would clear the clouds out of the way and we would have a magnificent view. How were we going to sit out the hours until the sun's warmth achieved these magical ends? I could have run the car and sat there with the heater going, but there was a catch. Our fuel was quite limited and such lavish behaviour could be punished with a long walk, clutching the jerry can. Instead, we pitched the large blue tent I had brought along, put the gas stove inside, and sat around in the warmth. The problem with this arrangement was that the gas stove ate the available oxygen.

By midday, nothing seemed any better. Daryl's next theory was that if we went downhill a bit, we would get a fantastic view from under the edge of the clouds. It seemed a good idea to get going anyway. We packed up and I drove carefully, carefully down the long, snaking road. Chunks of this near-new road had peeled away and toppled kilometres downhill, while elsewhere there were formidable washouts. These were so severe that I had to pay close attention as to where my wheels were, else the car end up stranded on its belly with the wheels spinning freely in space. In places, it could tip off the edge, lie on its roof and again spin the wheels aimlessly.

The road passed through the most spectacular desert mountain scenery imaginable. Next to us were the most rugged, jagged, barest mountains ever, soaring up to six or seven thousand metres. We were not just like ants, but veritably mere bacteria in such a scene. Not a tree, bush nor even a blade of grass were visible. All there was to see was pure, unadulterated geology, an entire, astonishing Himalayan range of it.



We passed through a tunnel. Daryl commented that "this is new" and I took a look at the alternative. The wheel ruts passed around a spur, dangling some thousand metres or more above the valley floor. For there was a valley floor and soon we were treated to the sight of a village, a mere hamlet even, snuggled into this crease in the landscape. Its buildings were classic Tibetan



## The Friendship Highway

in style, while bright green fields of barley were irrigated from meltwaters flowing in the stream.



This place is known as Ulang. I mused about how the people here had, until quite recently, been almost totally isolated. To get in, either you travelled from Nepal, or else over the Gue-La Pass at 5200m, on foot or maybe on horseback, for weeks. Whatever, your life would have had to be quite self-sufficient. Even today, there is no store for a long way, not to speak of a city with all mod cons. As we stopped and looked, I could hear dogs barking, people talking and someone chopping wood. These few noises were all that there was: no birds chirping, no wind whistling through the trees, and no hubbub of city life. It was perfectly quiet and serene.

From Ulang, the road continued downhill for a long way. Not so far away were some ruins, of an ancient fortification built in the shelter of the mountains. Indeed, some of the structures were nestled in caves and crevices within the ranges, probably in search of shelter from the wind and especially rain. The buildings were of rammed earth or mud-brick, materials which could readily wash away. I supposed, however, that the buildings had been abandoned after some war. Maybe you could enter upon the premises and find evidence to support the thesis, if you are interested in finding the remains of the defeated, or their weapons.

I once saw a (Chinese) documentary on Tibet which had some very graphic scenes of an abandoned battlefield, where the bodies of the dead and their weapons still lay strewn about, mummified by the cold and dry environment. They had been there for five hundred years.

## The Friendship Highway



**Ruins Of Dzongkag Pongdro**

Our attention was, however, entirely on getting to Everest, or at least to someplace where Everest might be visible. The drive from the main Friendship “Highway” was about a hundred kilometres, but (to labour a point) this was not plain sailing. By mid-afternoon, we were halfway there, over the rough and ready track that leads to Everest. We had travelled about forty kilometres downhill, arriving at the settlement of Tashi Dzom. This had been the regional “capital” before the Chinese arrived in October 1950. Now it is a watering point on the way to Mt Everest. This hotel accommodated both the rider and his horse, as you can gather from the scene below.



Inside, there was a party of British tourists, waiting for their lunch. A simple meal was 8 yuan. I was hungry and keen to eat, but where was Daryl? I had supposed that he would come in too. I went out and looked around, finding



## The Friendship Highway

him lying on the balustrade of the nearby bridge. No, he was not interested in eating. Eight yuan was far too much. This exasperated me, as eight yuan is about one US dollar and Daryl was an IT industry guru. You would think he would be able to afford a dollar for a meal. No, he wanted to be on his way. So I did not eat at Tashi Dzom, even though I was a bit peckish, and we were soon back on the road.

At the outskirts of town, a Buddhist monk was standing on the side of the road. He was happy to have a lift and was going about twenty kilometres. He also spoke some English, so we were amused by his responses to Daryl's questions about his vocation. He was on his way to officiate at a wedding and his usual means of transport was to hitch. Our halting conversation continued as we bumped and banged over this lumpy, bumpy road built of boulders rather than crushed stone. With the road surface constructed with cobbles up to 20 centimetres in diameter, it is hard to get a comfortable and smooth surface. Crushing the stone to one centimetre dimension would make the ride far more satisfactory. This means rewriting the Chinese rule-book about road construction, so I do not suppose any changes will happen soon.

The monk alighted, and we had about another thirty kilometres to go. The drive was now (unsurprisingly) all uphill, so much of the journey was made in second gear. Remember that the little car is trying to breathe air at half the sea-level pressure, through an air filter. If the road had been surfaced, I might have taken this off, but that would be madness with it being as dusty as it was. Occasionally I could change up to third and sometimes I had to be in first.

The road became steeper and steeper, rockier and rockier, and we came to a river valley, lined with terraces. These were evidence of erosion, sedimentation, uplift and then a renewed cycle of sedimentation. We were only twenty kilometres from the Everest Base Camp.



**Just twenty kilometres short of the base camp**

## The Friendship Highway

Ahead lay a monastery and a hotel, but we passed straight through, past a temple and finally arrived at the end of the road. We were there, at the Base Camp, and there was very little to see or do.

Now we had to wait for the cloud to go away. We learned that it had been clear that morning at the base camp, while we had been patiently waiting for the fog to lift at Gue-La Pass. Since then, the cloud had come in, obscuring Everest and all its neighbours. No-one could reasonably predict when the sky would be blue.





## A Few Days at Qomolangma Base Camp

Qomolangma is the Chinese (and Tibetan) name for Everest. It was a bit of a disappointment at first, as we were welcomed by the sight of many tatty tent "hotels", some blocks of latrines, a couple of recycling enclosures and there was a fair amount of rubbish scattered about - and the mountain was not visible. There was low cloud and it was quite cold. I set up my tent on a little patch of grass that had seen many Everest expeditioners, and went looking for something to do.



**My Tent At Base Camp**

I did not have to look hard, because a couple of teenage girls came and wanted to sit in the warmth of my car. I did not let them, not wanting them to get any ideas. Or people to get the wrong idea about me. Later I went into the shelter of one of the tent hotels, heated as they were by yak dung and with the entertainment of a slew of rather grubby but very friendly Tibetan women. Beer was 8 yuan (\$2 Aust) a bottle and served without the benefit of refrigeration, not necessary in any case as it was just above freezing outside. They also served meals, but I was a bit skittish about these as the women

## A few days at Qomolangma Base Camp

never thought to wash their hands after handling the yak poo, not even when they were cooking for guests. I went outside and whipped up a banquet on my gas cooker.



**Mayuki, Kaori and Jens inside a tent "hotel"**

We spent two nights at Everest Base Camp, patiently waiting out the rain in the tent hotels, beer in hand. I also took a break and wandered about, picking up the rubbish and putting in appropriate receptacles. It was not as though there was tons of it, but even ten kilograms of cans, papers, cartons etc, scattered over a hectare or two, can make it look unsightly. I would have liked to remove the hideous stripey-poly-tarpaulin tents and replace them with Tibetan nomad tents, which are aesthetically very pleasing and would fit in well. But at \$1000 or more each, it is not a project I was about to undertake during my 2-night, 3-day stay.



**A tent hotel from the outside with latrines behind**



## A few days at Qomolangma Base Camp

Daryl suggested that I should do the hike up to the first camp, a pleasant enough walk away, he claimed, and at about 6000 metres. He had done this during his previous visit. There were several factors mitigating against such an activity. To start with, I found it exhausting enough climbing up the hillock overlooking the camp, all of 20 metres high. Hiking up to 6000 metres might just be a bit much. Then there was the problem with the authorities. It was very specifically forbidden to go beyond the Base Camp without some sort of expeditioner's permit. The fine was something like \$3000 for breaches of the rules. Finally, with the incessant cloud and mist, there was some doubt if anything would be visible. Indeed, hiking up to 6000m in overcast conditions, alone, without adequate clothing, could just be a recipe for trouble. I decided to hang around the camp and wait.

About midday on the third day, the peak of Everest appeared for a couple of minutes, glowing in the sunlight but surrounded by cloud. I tried to photograph it, but the bloody camera didn't do the job properly. Then the cloud closed in again, only to open on the flanks, where more glimpses were to be had for short periods. The best I could manage was a picture of my trusty Wuling van, parked with Rongphu Glacier terminal moraine, a couple of mountains on either side, and a cloud where Everest should be.



**Wuling and Base Camp View Of Everest Shrouded By Cloud**

Earlier that day, I gave a Danish guy (Jens) and two Japanese women a lift down to the monastery, eight kilometres away. They were supposed to get a lift with a Landcruiser heading back to the highway, but I was dubious whether they would all succeed. I could see the girls getting away and the boy sitting by the roadside.



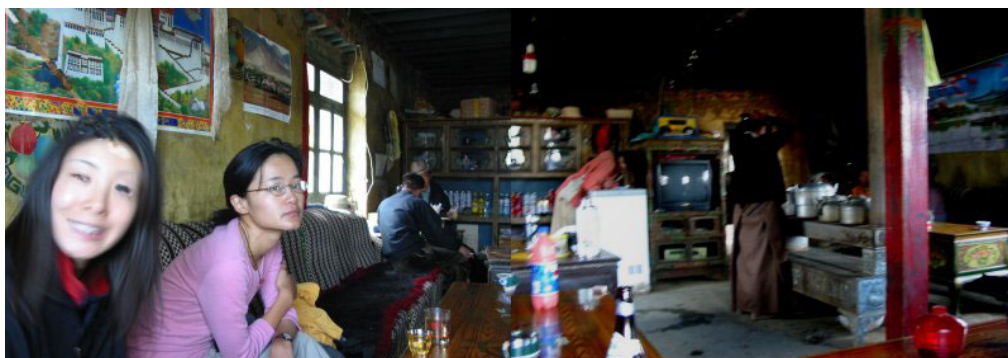
## A few days at Qomolangma Base Camp

After these glimpses, we waited another hour then headed down to the monastery, convinced that there little chance of seeing anything more. I had to think of getting back to Chengdu, nearly 4000km away on rough roads and I had three weeks to do it. Sitting around in the mist, fog, cloud, cold and rain for days on end can be a bit tiring, even if you sit in a tent hotel with Tibetan hostesses serving you Lhasa beer. I might wait another week before the cloud lifted.

At the monastery, it was the Japanese girls who had been left behind. Jens had got the lift because he was alone and had very little baggage. The girls were Mayuki and Kaori: both had hiked the entire 101km from the highway turnoff with substantial packs in four days, over a pass of 5200m then up to the base camp, also at 5200m. Tough Japanese women! They had been trekking all over Tibet and were proud of themselves and their fitness. But they did accept a lift back to Shergar.

Meanwhile, Daryl was quite busy at the hotel. They had a little generator, but it refused to start. He quickly had the carburettor in pieces, cleaned out the jets, put it back together and lo! it started first off. The hotel had been without light for days because no-one had the skills to fix the generator. Two chamber-maids watched as Daryl gave them a class on how to fix generators with blocked jets. It is my guess that the thing will stop functioning quite soon and the chamber-maids will not be able to rectify the problem.

With our two Japanese ladies as passengers, we headed back to Shergar. At the entry boom gate, we stopped and waited while they went off to retrieve their much heavier packs from a caretaker, then we drove past the army checkpoint again (the girls had their passports much more closely examined than did Daryl and I) and then into town, where we pulled up outside the hotel. They suggested that Daryl and I overnight there, but there were no bath facilities of any sort. I was desperate for a wash and can improvise when I camp, but not in a Tibetan hotel. The girls told me that they were not only tougher than most Japanese women, but also rather smellier! Nevertheless, they entertained us to a meal and a cup of tea at a Tibetan bar at Shergar which reminded me somewhat of an Indiana Jones (and the Lost Ark) set, a very gloomy, but interesting place.



**Mayuki and Kaori at Shergar Hotel**

## A few days at Qomolangma Base Camp

After dinner, Daryl and I were on our way, leaving the two tough and smelly Japanese girls to continue their adventures without us. Our objective for the night was to camp out somewhere about a hundred kilometres further east, and be in Lhasa the following evening. It was not to turn out that way.

On the return journey along the “Friendship Highway”, I had to ford a stream of which I have no recollection crossing while travelling the other way. The trucks, buses and 4WDs got through without any problem, but when it came to my turn, my left rear wheel sunk into a deep hole in the streambed and thereafter spun ineffectively. I put on my wellies and dug out the tow strap I carried in the back, then all I had to do was find a willing helper.

I stood beside the van, waving my tow-strap at passing traffic, but many passed with even slowing and considering the problem. Fortunately, there was quite a lot of passing traffic and a nice People’s Liberation Army officer in his spiffy Army Landcruiser stopped to offer assistance. Considering that he was in a neatly-pressed uniform with shiny black shoes, this was particularly kind of him. His wife and kid were in the car, presumably returning from a family Saturday afternoon picnic or something. It is a wonder they were not in uniform as well. The tow-strap was attached and performed its duty – just. It snapped a couple of times, but then we were out of the mire, thanked the PLA very much and continued.

Some kilometres later, the engine spluttered and started missing. Alarmed, I looked at the gauges, to see the oil warning light glowing. Bugger. I immediately stopped the vehicle and turned off the engine, got out and peered underneath. What I saw made me shudder. A stream of oil was flowing from the engine oil filter, apparently damaged during the creek crossing. Bugger. Bugger. Buggeration. Although I had spare engine oil, I did not have enough for a complete replacement and worse still, I did not have a spare oil filter. We would have to be towed into Latse, a town about six kilometres away. At least this had happened close to a town, not out on the Everest trail.

Again I stood on the roadside with my now-knotted tow strap. I would have to replace this very soon, with something a bit more substantial. The knots were reducing its effective length, meaning that I was very uncomfortably close to the car in front. A man with a shabby Landcruiser stopped and wanted 30 yuan for a tow into town.

Of course, we arrived in Latse to find the workshop closed. At least there was a workshop, but it was about nine on Saturday evening, so the proprietor was probably doing something more appropriate to the time of day and day of the week, like hanging out with his mates at the pub or watching TV with his wife. We left the van at the workshop, there being a person who could open the gate and take charge of it. We grabbed toiletries and a change of togs, and went looking for a hotel. There was only one, and it was virtually next door. The price was right, the available room had about five beds, but there were no bathroom or toilet facilities. Outside the room, there was concrete, maybe better than the usual mud and stone. I went looking for a toilet, but could find none and found myself having a pee in the yard. This was a tad

## A few days at Qomolangma Base Camp

unsatisfactory. Even the Qomolangma Base Camp had toilets, though they could better be described as “latrines.”

The next morning, I again had a need for toilets. As I went looking for the same, I was confronted by the sight of a young woman, maybe twenty, squatting by the front gate on the footpath, having a shit. I had never before seen anyone shit in the street, nowhere. This was not any street either, but the main street of Latse and right in the heart of town. Then I spied the toilets, not twenty metres from where she was doing her stuff, just off to the right. I went and had a crap there and wondered if the hotel would have preferred her to use their facilities rather than leave a pile of turds at their main gate.

The car had to be fixed. After treating ourselves to a somewhat minimal breakfast (the hotel did not do meals), Daryl and I wandered next door to the workshop. Nothing much was happening, maybe not surprising on a Sunday morning. The mechanic would be in soon.

This “workshop” looked a nightmare. It was a mess of discarded parts, rusty and dented oil drums, piles of cardboard cartons, partly-disassembled vehicles and dead trucks. Among this was my dead Wuling. After some kerfuffle, the van was pushed over a pit and the oil filter removed. It had a little hole where it had encountered a sharp rock. The filter proved impossible to replace.



Meanwhile, a truck turned up for work, disgorging its load of passengers. In Tibet, trucks carry passengers, mostly in the load space but in this case, in the cabin with the driver. Most of them were squeezed in the space behind the seats. Down climbed five women, all of them quite smartly dressed, complete with high heels and makeup. They seemed an unlikely load for a blue Dong Feng truck. As they alighted, several waved to Daryl and myself, bid us “hello” and disappeared. I wondered what all of that might be about. I doubted if they were the driver’s sisters.

By midday, having exhausted the replacement options, the mechanic had resorted to silver-soldering up the hole. At least we could be on the road to someplace where a spare was available, that place being Shigatse. For his



## A few days at Qomolangma Base Camp

brazing and a bit of oil, I was charged 240 yuan. The engine started and ran without blowing smoke or missing and there were no tell-tale signs of broken rings or bugged bearings, so I did not believe any damage had been done. I was relieved beyond measure that an engine rebuild was not required and paid up without a murmur of complaint.

From Latse, it was still quite a drive on rough dirt road to Shigatse. Though 170 kilometres sounds small beer to someone accustomed to driving in the West, in Tibet it takes three or four hours to cover that distance, if you are lucky. We were lucky – it was a beautiful day, with long periods of sunshine, the sky filled with white cumulus clouds and the surrounding fields yellow with canola flower. In the distance were the barren but beautiful mountains of the Tibetan Plateau. As we travelled, we met up with two North Americans (OK, they might have been Canadians) cycling westwards. Each of them had a beautiful bicycle, equipped with the most desirable of accessories and ready for the long ride to Katmandu. Knowing the high passes and rough road ahead, I wished them good luck and fine weather for their journey.



I cannot claim that the day was difficult in any way and by the late afternoon we were in Shigatse. There we made a return visit to the public bathhouse, having the first proper wash in about a week. Then we went hunting for tools. With our adventures during the past few days, I felt it imperative to have a more comprehensive array of automotive tools. Also, the tow strap bought in Chengdu a couple of months earlier was now only about two metres long, what with all the knots and so on. It was also piss-weak, breaking at the slightest inclination. For seventy-five yuan, I got a steel tow-cable with proper eyes at either end and some shackles to attach it to the vehicles. After purchasing this, buying some fresh vegetables and having a restaurant meal,

## A few days at Qomolangma Base Camp

we were on our way at about 8pm. That evening, we planned to camp in the same village as we were at on the outward leg, about 90km east of Shigatse.

At the outskirts of Shigatse, a girl was hitchhiking. We stopped and picked her up, to find that she was a high-school student on her way back to school, where she boarded during the week. This is a common arrangement in China, so that students can be in full-time education at major towns, yet spend the weekends with their families. She was Tibetan, was about seventeen and was chatting a lot with Daryl. I had my eyes on the road.

The road was now sealed. After driving about eight hundred kilometres on dirt roads, mostly amazingly rough, it was a great pleasure to have a reasonably smooth road. I could do 90kph quite comfortably, much better than the 30-40kph which had been common for much of the past week. As I drove over a rise, I was suddenly confronted by a flock of sheep. I came to a quite dramatic halt, then proceeded carefully through the flock. Then I continued, only to have a similar incident at the next rise. Whatever the wisdom of herding flocks of sheep along a major road in fading light, it behooved me to travel slowly and to keep my eyes open. 65kph seemed a more rational speed.

Something was on the road in front of me. As I approached, I realized that it was a laden passenger tractor, being driven away from me to the left of the centre-line of the road. I slowed down a lot, not knowing what the driver might be about to do, keeping a close eye on the tractor as I approached. There were about four or five passengers standing in the rear trailer, probably local villagers on their way home after a day at the Shigatse markets. "That should be slow enough," I thought as I approached to about twenty metres. As I came close to the tractor, I noticed a cyclist on the right-hand side of the road, but as I was about to pass the tractor, the bicycle suddenly veered across in front of me. "Not slow enough," I muttered as I braked hard, veered to the left trying to avoid the cyclist yet not at the same time hitting the passenger tractor.

I glanced towards the cyclist, seeing his eyes as he realized he was about to hit a vehicle. Then I switched my attentions back to the gap in front, the gap between the cyclist and tractor, the gap I had to get through without hitting either.

There was a loud bang on my right-hand side, a bicycle skittering off up the road, and the Tibetan girl passenger started to scream. I pulled up under a tree on the left hand side of the road, jumped out and as I ran to see what had happened, shouted to Daryl: "I have been driving thirty-six years and never had an accident."

## Accident near Shigatse

Within seconds, I was at the boy's side. He was lying face-down on the road, his legs spreadeagled, as I knelt down and felt for his carotid artery. Yes, there was a pulse, and further investigation revealed that he was breathing. He was, however, unconscious. I was sure that he had suffered head injuries and maybe spinal damage.

Quickly, a group of men came up and the first thing they did was drag me away. A voice in English asked "What happened?" One of the crowd could speak English.

"He rode his bicycle across in front of me and I hit him. Ask them not to move him, at all. I have had First Aid training." The man spoke to the group surrounding the boy and, curiously enough, they obeyed my instruction. "He may have injuries which will be made worse if he is moved," I continued.

Some wild scenes followed. A middle-aged man, apparently the father of the boy, turned up and was predictably very upset. He tried fighting his way to me, probably with the intention of beating me up, but members of the crowd restrained him. I went over with the interpreter and tried to explain what had happened and to express my sorrow, but to no avail. The father was furious and struggled, his eyes streaming with angry tears.



Scene just after arrival of police jeep

Daryl and I were left standing around while the group of men attended to the injured boy. There was no traffic and it was necessary to get the boy to



## Accident near Shigatse

hospital as soon as possible. The only vehicle being mine, I would have to do the job. The question was: “How?” He seemed quite short and maybe we could lay him across the rear seats of the van, with someone attending to him as I drove back to Shigatse to the hospital. As I was about to arrange for the boy to be loaded aboard, a police vehicle turned up.

The English-speaker turned out to be a schoolteacher, and served as an interpreter for much of the evening. This was godsend, as he could immediately help with my communications with the police officer.

“You can leave now and I will fix up the paperwork,” was the interpreted message I got from the police officer. Plainly this was pretty irregular and likely to get me into a lot of trouble. Also, I did not think it morally sound, no matter how little the accident might be my fault, to just disappear. The situation was, however, very complex and very fragile. I was, after all, driving a vehicle in Tibet without a permit and I could foresee incredibly serious ramifications.

“In my country, leaving the site of an accident is a pretty serious offence,” was the message conveyed back to the officer. Again, I was told I could leave, and I responded to say that I would stay as long as was necessary. Of course I was aware that I was in a very delicate position and anything could happen: arrest, imprisonment, expulsion from China, or confiscation of the vehicle. Disappearing from the scene of the accident could aggravate the situation immeasurably. The best course of action would be to cooperate with the authorities fully, taking whatever responsibility was appropriate.



**Accident scene shortly after the arrival of the police**

It was essential that I recorded the circumstances and impressions immediately. To this end, I fired up my video and still cameras and quickly recorded the scene. I then took out my notebook in which I had kept the

## Accident near Shigatse

scanty records made thus far of the journey. Mostly these notes were of the kilometres covered, the coordinates and elevations of passes and campsites, the expenses and particularly the fuel consumption. These records had been a mystery to the Army a few weeks earlier, when I had my little run-in with the military police. I wrote a few sentences, which are reproduced below:-

9:05pm 4 August 2002  
13472km

*At about 8:40pm, travelling east along Friendship Highway at about 65-70 km/hr, I found myself entering a village with a tractor laden with passengers on the road. While slowing and avoiding this, a bicycle on the right hand side with a boy rider suddenly veered into my path. I swerved to the left and braked hard, nevertheless hitting the cyclist.*

*After stopping, I jumped out and immediately checked the condition of the boy, who was lying face-down but without external injury. He was breathing with a regular pulse. I restrained others from moving him, for fear of aggravating spinal or neck injuries. He was bleeding from the nose or mouth.*

The police officer decided to take the boy into hospital. His simple Jeep lacked any comforts in the back, so I went to the van, pulled out my air mattress, and inflated it. I walked over to the group who were still attending to the boy, giving them a now-rigid air mattress to use as a stretcher.

“They are pulling him to pieces,” Daryl said to me, concerned. I had not been allowed near, but went to investigate. Several men had carefully rolled the boy over, laid him on the mattress, and took him to the back of the Jeep. With the correct stretcher and trained personnel, you could do better, but these people had been as careful as possible under the circumstances. I could only hope he did not have spinal or neck injuries, though my impression was that he had concussion and possibly a fractured skull.

Moments later, they were gone and I was left standing in the gloom with a crowd of men. They were sitting on the road, waiting for something to happen. The situation being plainly unsafe and the men refusing to get off the road, I turned on my emergency lights. At least then, no vehicle would drive into the crowd. Two of the men rose and stood in front of the amber flashing lights, so that the crowd were not blinded by them. It also prevented approaching vehicles from being warned of the scene and indeed several trucks came through the village, slowing as they passed. Shortly, I was instructed by the remaining police officer to turn the lights off, to which I objected. He put his head into the cabin and turned them off. When I turned them on, he again intervened, again turning them off.

After an hour or more, the traffic accident investigators arrived from Shigatse, in a little van and with a tow truck. They measured things, photographed the scene and the interpreter asked me a few questions. Of course they wanted my explanation of what had happened, but one of these questions was “Why did you move the car? You are not allowed to move a vehicle after an accident.”

“No other vehicle was available and the boy was lying on the road, seriously injured. I was about to take him to hospital.” With that answer, there were no

## Accident near Shigatse

more questions, but they wanted to tow my van into Shigatse. "I can drive my car and follow you into town." Daryl and I were both concerned that we would be separated from our possessions and felt that we were in control of our own destiny while we were in the van. We followed the tow truck, it proceeding ahead with the bent bicycle aboard.

Arriving in Shigatse, the police went straight to a yard and my van was parked under a shelter and we were asked to take whatever we needed, lock the vehicle and leave it with them. It was impounded pending further investigations.

We were then asked to accompany the officers in their little police van and they would find us a place to stay for the night. I had had some premonitions of being put into a cell, but they were not doing that. A hotel room was what they had in mind, but it was easier said than done. The town was packed due to some festival and in the end I found myself sharing a room with six Tibetan men. As I was shown to my room, Daryl was arguing with the police at hotel reception about who would pay for his accommodation.

My night was disturbed, to say the least. The six Tibetan men smoked, watched television, talked, drank and finally turned in sometime before dawn. Generally, the inhabitants of the room smelled as though they needed to use the public baths Daryl and I had visited a few hours earlier.

In the morning, I packed, checked out and then set about trying to get to the traffic police station that we had visited briefly the night before. The hotel receptionist had no idea what I wanted. He could not speak English, and I no Chinese or Tibetan. Somehow I had supposed that the officer who delivered me the night before might have told the hotel management where they were from and where I needed to go. They had asked me to come in at 10:00am, but had not provided me with an address, name or telephone number. Maybe I should have asked.

The hotel management had no idea at all. I tried to catch a taxi to the desired location, notwithstanding that it was a struggle to find a driver who could understand English. Shortly I was at a police station, but not the one I had been at the night before. No-one at the station understood English but several phone calls were made. I ended up speaking to the PSB foreign affairs office, the one where Daryl and I had obtained travel permits the previous week. There, at least, someone could speak English and I knew where it was. Another taxi was called, the police explained to the driver where I needed to go, and shortly before 11am, I was at the PSB Foreign Affairs Office, explained the situation, and they contacted the traffic police. While I waited, I sat at my computer and typed a statement, which is reproduced on the following page.



## Accident near Shigatse

11am 5 August 2002

*On Sunday August 4, 2002, I was driving east towards Lhasa from Shigatse. I had two passengers, an American I know as Darryl who travelled with me from Lhasa to Mt Everest (Qomolangma) and back to Shigatse, and a Tibetan Middle School student who hitched a lift with us as we left Shigatse.*

*At about 8:30pm, roughly 15km east of Shigatse, I had to slow and stop twice due to flocks of sheep on the road. This was a caution to drive carefully, and I kept my speed down despite the excellent road conditions. Some kilometres further along, while travelling at perhaps 65kph, I saw a tractor on the road a hundred metres or so ahead. It had several passengers and though driving eastwards like me, it was slightly to the left of the centre of the road. I thought it might be turning left, so slowed down to cautiously overtake the vehicle on the right. Other than the tractor, I did not notice any other hazards. My attention was mostly on the tractor.*

*When I was perhaps 10m from the tractor, a bicycle very suddenly veered onto the road. I braked hard and swerved left, trying not to hit either the tractor or the cyclist. The cyclist looked towards me as he veered out. I had my eyes on the road and tractor as I passed the cyclist, heard a loud bang as the bicycle hit the right side of my vehicle, and pulled up on the left hand hard shoulder of the road under a tree. The bicycle slid past on the road and came to rest over the road from my car.*

*It was only as the cyclist pulled out in front of me that I realised that I was in a village. The road is tree-lined for some distance west, concealing the village's presence. Though I had slowed because of flocks of sheep and then the tractor, I had no idea that I was approaching a village when I first saw the tractor.*

*After stopping, I jumped from my vehicle and immediately ran to attend to the cyclist. He was unconscious, lying face-down on the road and bleeding from the mouth and nose. I have first-aid training and checked if he was breathing and had a pulse. I restrained bystanders from moving him, knowing that he possibly had spinal, neck or head injuries and that in his current position he was unlikely to aspirate if he vomited. As I had the only vehicle present, I moved my car to a position close to the boy, in preparation to take him to hospital. As it happened, a police vehicle arrived shortly after. I inflated an air mattress which was then used as a stretcher and he was taken from the scene.*

*My two passengers are not available now. The Tibetan Middle School student disappeared from the accident scene and has not been seen since. The American, Darryl, whose surname is unknown to me, removed all his possessions from my vehicle after it was impounded by the police. He refused to stay at the hotel selected by the police and I last saw him in the hotel reception at about 1am this morning. I mention this because these two people were my witnesses present in the van. For example, they saw the care I took with the flocks of sheep, and Darryl actually saw the cyclist hit the car, while I was preoccupied with controlling the car under an emergency situation.*

*Darryl saw the cyclist hit the vehicle. The cyclist's head hit the right rear-view mirror, while the front of the bicycle hit my vehicle and caused some panel damage. He believed the cyclist landed on the road at the point of impact and that only the bicycle was thrown by the vehicle. I thought I might have been doing 50kph before the emergency arose, but his estimate was 35kph.*

*Since purchasing my car in Chengdu early in April, I have had to avoid hundreds or even thousands of potential accidents where pedestrians, cyclists, animals and vehicles quite unpredictably got in my way. I have a policy of taking utter caution at all times, moving through villages slowly, watching for hazards from all directions at all times. On this occasion, two hazards occurred at the same time at the same place and I failed to avoid one of them.*

## Accident near Shigatse

The police had a computer and printer handy, so a copy of the statement was available immediately for signing and presentation to the investigating officers, who arrived as I typed.

“Why did you not come to the office at 10am, as agreed last night?” the interpreter asked me.

“I tried my best, but I did not know where your office was, nor did the hotel nor any taxi drivers. I found that the best I could do was to come here.” With that explanation, they understood and did not pursue that matter any further.



**Police photo of the boy shortly after admission to hospital**

After completing the statement and an accompanying map, the interpreter went through it with the superintendent. Quite a lot of talk followed, the outcome of which was that they wanted a RMB5000 deposit immediately and a lot more money later on, even though they accepted that the accident was not really my fault. In fact, their feeling was that because I had money and the boy came from a poor peasant family, I should pay a huge, unspecified amount regardless of fault. One difficulty I have with this is that there is no guarantee that the family will even benefit from this.

Two more men turned up, one an interpreter, the other in a grey suit. They told me that the death of a child was a big thing and that RMB5000 was required immediately. I raised the question of my insurance policy, which I hold with the Peoples Insurance Company of China. My stated feeling was that the PICC should be contacted immediately. They said that the Chengdu office of the PICC would be at lunch. Anyway, their phone was not able to be used for interprovincial calls. They kept raising the matter of an immediate

payment of RMB5000. Much more would have to be paid before I could leave Shigatse. I made it quite plain that this was a bit rich when the boy was so obviously at fault and I had taken every precaution against traffic accidents. He had simply swerved wildly onto the road into my path without looking. The interpreter (and presumably the police superintendent) conceded that it might not be my fault, but that the RMB5000 was needed immediately.

"All the more reason to contact the PICC urgently," was my response. The superintendent looked at my insurance details on a card together with my vehicle registration and tax details in a little folder. Yes, he could contact the Sichuan PICC during the lunchhour, which stretched from 1pm to 4pm .

The harder these men kept pressing me for an immediate payment of RMB5000, the more suspicious I became. I suspected they were going to line their own pockets and maybe those of corrupt doctors with this cash. I could not help but wonder what the condition of the boy was. I wanted to visit him regularly to see him and comfort his family, but it had now become a question of determining whether the boy has died or is recovering.

Moreover, I wanted to help the family out. Regardless of whether the matter was the boy's fault (as I was sure it was) they had few resources and needed support. The problem was with the behaviour of the police, who looked as they wanted the cash for themselves. They could have at least stooped to detailing how much was required immediately and what for, rather than just dreaming up a huge number out of thin air.

My next step was to seek advice from the Australian Embassy in Beijing, however that might be obtained. I didn't imagine they would be a huge help, but they might have been able to reassure me or otherwise on the procedures here. And the Traffic Police would have to put me in contact with the Embassy, one way or another.

At 4pm I was back at the Public Security Bureau, where I met an Israeli couple who I had seen previously in Lhasa. I told them of my troubles and they hung around after processing of their permit applications and chatted with me, and meanwhile the police I had been involved with had extensive discussions between themselves in Chinese. After more than an hour, two or even three interpreters arrived on the scene and discussions began in earnest.

The discussions with these interpreters were very constructive, insofar as I was assured that the matter of a deposit was routine in China, and also that my insurance with PICC was valid in Tibet. They did find it a curious thing that I wanted to get in contact with the Australian Embassy in Beijing. Some of my papers were returned on request, but not my driver's license nor the vehicle registration. Those, and the car, would be in their hands for a few days. A woman interpreter explained to me with some care that if she went to hospital, a deposit of one or two thousand yuan would be required. I explained to the police that I did have money, but I also had to get back to Chengdu and survive for the next month until I was paid. Finally we agreed that I would pay RMB2000 immediately.



## Accident near Shigatse

Several of us set off for the China Construction Bank, so I could draw some money to pay the hospital. As we departed the PSB, the boy's father was waiting outside with a medical report. The boy was brain dead. We were a bit late at the bank, arriving at 6:15pm, a quarter of an hour after their closing time. There were no ATMs in town and the Bank of China would also be closed. The driver proceeded to the hospital.

I could not help but observe the behaviour of this police driver, sitting behind him as I was in the van. He would charge at pedestrians on zebra crossings with his horn blaring, make turns without looking either way for traffic, cut corners dramatically, drive on the wrong side of the road if there was traffic in the way, and lean out of the window and abuse people who happened to be in his path. Indeed, his passenger, the superintendent Zhou Gang, would also lean out the window and abuse people on his side. A lot of the victims of this behaviour were Tibetans. I wonder how they feel about it. Both the officers were Han (Chinese). I told my interpreter that this sort of driving would quickly result in a license suspension in Australia. The interpreter responded that the man was a good driver.

Arriving at the hospital, our party went to the boy's hospital room, where his condition seemed unchanged from the night before. His brother was still by him, holding his foot. There was a drip in his right arm, an oxygen cylinder by his left. A moist towel was on his forehead. After a minute we went into a conference in an adjacent office. The father and two of the boy's friends were present, the police and their interpreter, and a group of rather scruffily-dressed men whom I gradually realised were doctors. Basically, the conference was about the money I would deposit with the hospital.

As I did not have RMB2000 in Chinese currency on me (only about 1700, and I wanted to keep some of that for expenses) I thought I should check how many Hong Kong dollars I was carrying in my "other" wallet. To my surprise, it was \$HK1000, about 1060RMB of a currency they would understand. I dug that out, and a thousand yuan from an envelope. I put this on the table and someone went off to attend to a receipt. The father then said something to the doctors and police, which was interpreted to me. He told them that I was driving to Lhasa and had run into the back of his son on the road. I thought I had better correct this impression with the father, because he was quite bitter and also obviously looking for a lot of compensation. I told him through the interpreter that I did not want to offend his memory of his son, but the circumstances were rather different. I took out a piece of paper and drew a plan showing my version of events... how I had slowed down for a tractor that was in the middle of the road, and how just as I was about to pass with that tractor on the left, his son had violently swerved into the middle of the path of my van, how I had taken dramatic evasive action but his son's head had hit my rear-vision mirror. The interpreter explained the details to the father.

What then followed was a little bizarre. One of the doctors started to verbally attack the father, continuing for several minutes in a fashion that I could only

describe as extremely unsympathetic and inappropriate in the circumstances. The father, a man in his forties, was nearly in tears.

Shortly the meeting had finished. I had a receipt for my Hong Kong dollars, complete with the serial numbers of the banknotes, and for the yuan. I went and held the father's hand, then the boy's friend, then went to see the boy and his brother at the bedside again. The police took me to my vehicle to get some things - some clothing and my toilet bag in particular - then took me to the Friendship Hotel where my Israeli acquaintances were staying.

I had dinner with them and then met some people who were sharing my room.

The "backpacker" rooms at the "Friendship" Hotel were rather basic accommodation, but had the considerable merit of being about a quarter to a tenth of the price of the usual hotel rooms. As I was liable to be stuck in Shigatse for some time, it would be quite unwise to take a room at \$50 - \$100 per night when \$5 would do the job. I did get to share with three other people.

Sometimes my room-mates were women, but mostly there were men, European men. Curiously, a fair proportion of them were doctors, one in particular being James. He was a young Scot who had just done a six-month stint in a hospital in Kathmandu before starting an adventure in Tibet. He described to me the procedures he would follow in dealing with a patient with a depressed fracture of the skull, which was the case with the boy.

The rooms themselves were about four metres square and contained four iron-framed single beds. They were in a block of six, facing onto a paved courtyard. The floors were of quite bare concrete, the bedding was shabby and probably unwashed for weeks at a time, while a single window faced to the exterior, covered in grime and provided with a threadbare curtain for privacy. Outside, there was a cold tap over a concrete trough at one end, which supplied a basic facility for personal hygiene. If you wanted to do a more thorough job, you had to visit the public showers in the centre of Shigatse, about a kilometre away. These rooms had probably had a former life as staff quarters but had been converted to a money-making venture when faced with the considerable demand from backpacker tourists. At 30 yuan per night per bed, the hotel was thus making about 700 yuan per day from the building, not bad when very little is being supplied – rare clean linen, no hot water, just a bare light bulb and an iron bed.

Apart from the Israeli couple, Natty and Ilsa, another familiar face arrived on the scene – Marais, the Dutch woman with whom I had visited the Sera Monastery in Lhasa. I found myself engaged in long conversations with them about my situation and how to extricate myself with the least possible harm and expense.

I also sent text messages to everyone I could, and email. I found the local internet café wanted the equivalent of \$5 per hour for their services, about ten times the charge elsewhere in China. A restaurant just down the street had a telephone and I had a dialup account costing the usual fee (less than a dollar

per hour), so with a bit of negotiation, the owner agreed to my using his telephone for an intermediate amount. This also had the advantage of fewer blockages along the way, as Internet Cafes in China tend to prevent access to sites such as Hotmail. I broadcast news of my predicament to all and sundry, believing that the more people knew of my situation, the less likely I was to disappear without trace into some Tibetan prison. Also, I contacted the Australian Embassy in Beijing.

The embassy took some time to respond, but after a couple of days I was in occasional contact with a man responsible for Aussies who got into trouble in some way or the other. His advice was to let the police know that the embassy was watching what was going on, but he also told me that there was almost nothing they could do. Five thousand dollars would also be a very modest cost for involvement in a traffic accident where there was an injury. He would provide a list of lawyers with whom I could consult. When I received this list via email, the closest was in Shanghai, five thousand kilometres away. I was on my own, except that they gave me my contact phone number to my brother.

Another person I contacted was my boss, Yang Huidong, who was the “foreign affairs” officer at Chengdu University of Technology. Her response was that I was “too far away” to assist. I pointed out that Tibet was actually the adjacent province to Sichuan: did this mean that she would wash her hands of any involvement with staff difficulties the moment they were outside Sichuan Province? I gave her the name of investigating officer (Zhou Gang) and his telephone number and asked her to contact him and try to sort things out.

I needed help. The police interpreter was hardly helpful, insofar as the advice he gave me was of course to simply do whatever the police wanted. This was a trap I could do without. The most ideal help would be Ms Wang Xiaofeng, who had studied the law for the past year or so. Ms Wang, however, was in Chengdu and had a job to do. The help had to come from some other quarter.

Though the police had taken me to the hospital, I felt I should go and see for myself what was going on. Getting there in the back of a police van was helpful, but I had little sense of where I was. I tried walking. On my way into the town centre, I passed a hospital and presumed this might be the place. The architecture was much the same, but I had no recollection of a guard on the front gate. In any case, I walked in unchallenged, but quickly realised that I was in a military hospital. This would not do. I left, again unchallenged by the armed guard at the front gate. You would wonder what the guards are for if they do not challenge entry by a person who is obviously foreign. One thing that alerted me to it being a military hospital was that everything was so neat and tidy, that it exuded the fact that it had a generous budget and wealthy clients. There were beautiful gardens, expensive cars and everything was neat and tidy, not like the Shigatse general hospital, garden-free, shabby, dirty and with latrines outside the ward. It took another day before I located the general hospital.

My walk continued, down to the police traffic station. I needed to collect more things from my car, particularly battery chargers, my gas stove and more clothing. Also, I wanted to go out to the village and look around in daylight. For no good reason, it seemed appropriate that I do so in the company of the police superintendent Zhao Gang. When I went into the office, it was locked. No-one had any idea when he would be at work, so I went around the corner, to his flat. Even police superintendents in China live on-campus, so it was only a short walk from his office to home. Repeated knocking on the door achieved nothing.

A large yard was nearby, filled with many damaged vehicles. Among them was an undamaged vehicle, with PICC written on the side. This was the insurance company assessor's car and I thought it a good idea to make contact. I waited around and made my presence known to the assessor when he had dealt with his current case. He seemed a busy man. There were several taxis in the yard, surprising when you consider that the town only had a dozen or so. There were destroyed trucks, destroyed buses and a whole retinue of written-off cars. For a town with so little traffic, it had a lot of cars down at the police yard. These were all impounded because someone had been injured or killed. "Laowai" I heard said. They knew that I existed and quickly came and had a look at the car. The damage was quite minor and in fact that was not what was on my mind at all. The damage to the boy's head was what concerned me most.

When Zhao Gang and the interpreter arrived, I was told that witnesses had seen me run into the back of the bicycle. This, I objected, was not the case and that none of the damage – to the car, to the boy's head, nor to the bicycle – was consistent with this explanation. I reiterated that the bicycle had been ridden across my path and that putting the bike together with the vehicle would illustrate that. The superintendent was unimpressed and was not happy for me to take the bike and put it next to the car. Finally, he had no choice, and the insurance representative and members of the police stood around as I demonstrated what had happened.



**The bent bicycle aligned with dings in the van**



## Accident near Shigatse

There was no damage to the bicycle consistent with a rear collision. In that case, you would expect some damage at the back – the wheel buckled and shoved forwards, the carrier bent, or somesuch. All the damage to both vehicles could best be explained by a side collision.

While I was at it, I had a look at the bicycle. It had no functioning brakes, the front cable being disconnected and the rear one not actually resulting in the calipers gripping on the rim. Even when the boy realised his mistake, as he had in the second prior to impact, there was nothing he could do about it. Of course, there were no lights, nor had the boy worn a helmet. Such fripperies are unknown in China. A helmet could have been a useful accessory in the circumstances.

I asked about a visit to the village, but was fobbed off. The superintendent was busy. Maybe later.

The PICC assessor was about to return to his office. Superintendent Zhao Gang and the interpreter took me there, where we would sort out the situation with my insurance, central to the issue of getting some money to pay for the boy's hospitalisation. I rather imagined that I would complete a claim form, pay an excess, and the insurance company would do the rest.

The insurance company offices were some distance from the police station, were very modern and spacious, but had a scarcity of staff. It took quite some time to get attention, to deal with the matter of ringing Chengdu, finding out what the procedures were, and getting the matter resolved. I had thought wrong about the form. There were no forms. We sat around in the waiting room and I was entertained by watching the superintendent and the interpreter killing time. Zhao Gang was all a-quiver, indeed I wondered if he had early symptoms of Parkinson's disease. He fiddled with a desk calendar and I took some illicit photographs. I had to wonder how a man who could not drive and whose mind was plainly failing him could be put in charge of accident investigations. Maybe his Party membership was all that counted.



In fact, I was completely wrong about filling in a form and having the insurance company do the rest. Rather, I had to pay everything, then take all

the receipts back to Chengdu and lodge a claim. “Not an insurance company” became my description of the so-called PICC.

### **Other distractions**

The traffic office was on the opposite side of town and as often as not, Zhou Gang was out, probably doing his job. There were plenty of crashes (“accident” is hardly the appropriate word for the predictable outcome of routinely insane driving) in Shigatse and environs for him to investigate. He could not give me his undivided attention for weeks.

Staying at the Friendship Hotel, I had to do something about washing myself. This “hotel” did not provide any facilities for backpackers to wash, apart from a cold tap over an outdoor concrete trough. This was adequate for brushing teeth but little else. You could, of course, go for a walk downtown, but being about a kilometre away this constituted quite a walk to have a shower. I found a fairly private space among the weeds in the courtyard – huge thistles actually – and some cardboard cartons, thoughtfully discarded in the weed patch after removing the refrigerator that had been shipped within. With a bit of rearrangement, a private enclosure suitable for bathing was set up. All I needed was some warm water, which was one reason I had brought my gas cooker and a pot back from the police yard. I set the gas stove up nearby, filled the (large) pot with water, and when it was the right temperature, indulged myself in a bit of a splash.

For meals, evening meals at least, I would wander down to a local restaurant. The establishment did noodles, prepared freshly after you lodged your order. They had noodles with yak, noodles and chicken, noodles and pork, but mostly I would have noodles with egg. There were many other things on the menu, but though many of the restaurant’s clients were Western backpackers, the menu was entirely in Chinese. There was another restaurant further along, but the fare was not as tasty, maybe as a consequence of having a menu in English and thereby catering for bland Western tastes. They also charged twice as much. The man with the noodle



**preparation of noodles in restaurant**

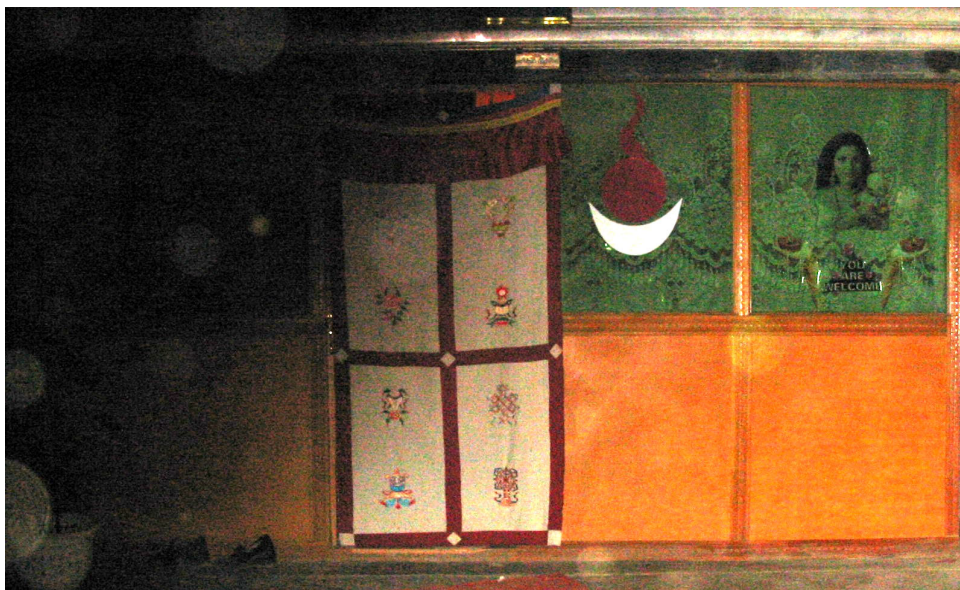
## Accident near Shigatse

restaurant was often empty while backpackers walked past to the place with an English menu. I thought it would be nice to do something about this, especially as I had a computer.

The owner of the restaurant was happy to have me use his telephone line for dialup Internet, provided I paid of course. With this arrangement in place, I spent many hours in the day and evening, mostly dealing with email and the accident. Quite a few of his clients were fascinated by the arrangement: a laptop computer connected to a phone line, with lots of magical content from all over the world. Laptops were quite rare in China at the time, particularly in towns in Tibet.

Getting to the restaurant required walking on the street, particularly at night. Though there was provision for pedestrians, the footpath was hidden behind an attractive screen of poplars and there the locals would squat and do their stuff. There were no public toilets anywhere, so shitting in the street was a normal and acceptable activity. People did not squat on the road proper, so you could stroll along that with a diminished risk of treading in something nasty. The downside was the risk of being run down in the dark, for which reason I carried a torch. I would ensure that any oncoming vehicle was well aware that I was on the road and did not wish to be squished.

Coming back to my hotel in daylight, I noticed a business opposite that looked like a restaurant. My regular restaurant was a rather a long walk away, and at night the road was not lit and the traffic a bit threatening. Furthermore, I was bored with eating the same three vegetarian dishes day in, day out. The establishment opposite had a picture of the same Indian actress (Aishwara Govinda) as my regular restaurant, plus an English sign reading "You are welcome." Maybe they had an English menu and (hope upon hope) Indian food.



At about 9pm, I decided to go and eat alone, my Israeli friends I had eaten with last night being somewhat indisposed. I left the hotel and crossed the



street to the prospective new restaurant. It has a crescent moon beside the door and a classic Tibetan hanging. I put my head in the door and asked: "Is this a restaurant?" There were sofas, rugs, low tables and soft lighting. You might have mistaken it for a coffee shop. But there was also incense, and five Tibetan women in traditional costume seated around one of the tables, with five open bottles of beer. "... or something else?" I added. "Tashi Delek" they chorussed back, beckoning for me to enter. I very quickly got an impression of the nature of business being conducted on the premises, and decided to leave instantly. I crossed the road rather sheepishly, wondering what the locals would make of my disinclination to use the facility.

I walked up to my regular restaurant, took my usual seat and ate exactly the same fried vegetables and fresh noodles dish that I had ordered the previous evening. While waiting for the meal, I sent SMS messages to various friends, none of whom seemed to think the situation funny.

### Music festival

My stay in Shigatse coincided with a Tibetan music festival. Indeed, my arrival in the middle of the night after the accident had been complicated by the lack of accommodation, as everything was booked out. Numerous large and colourful balloons floated above a nearby stadium, advertising to the world in Chinese characters that something was going on. This being only a few hundred metres away and on the route into the town centre, I decided to go and have a look.

As I arrived, there were many people coming the other way, but I threaded my way through the crowd and straight into the stadium. I kept going, walking right up to the stage and appreciating the performance, the costumes and all the technology involved at close range. There was a huge mixer setup and a number of television cameras scattered here and there. As I was carrying a video camera as well, I did not hesitate to capture a little of what I saw.





## Accident near Shigatse

Then it all stopped. The performers stood for a round of applause then tramped off the stage, the crowd started to stream out of the stadium. I had had the good fortune to see the last couple of minutes of the performance. Maybe I should come back the following day and see more?



As I departed, I called by the ticket office. Just looking at the prices was something of a surprise: they started at 260 yuan, rather more than I felt I could afford under the circumstances. Enquiry revealed that it was sold out, so the expenditure became purely hypothetical.

The performers streamed out, shortly to be loaded onto trucks and driven away. I guess for a people who only a decade before probably had to go everywhere on foot, riding in the back of a truck is a luxury. Still, I would have thought that if you can afford to charge half a month's income for entry and broadcast the show on national and international television, you could lay on a bus. This is how the performers were moved from the venue.



I had to question the authenticity of the entire performance. In Tibet, the Tibetans speak Tibetan, and their songs are sung in Tibetan. The proceedings, nevertheless, seemed to be conducted in Chinese, together with all the signs, the coloured balloons and indeed the songs were apparently sung in Chinese. The government of the PRC is apparently quite fond of gathering their minorities together, dressing them up in pretty costumes and have them put on mass performances of this nature, in Chinese. Were the performers Tibetan? The women in the back of the truck seemed friendly enough, calling out “Hello” to me, waving and smiling.

The next morning, I walked down the same street past the stadium, to find it cordoned-off by the police. I was actually on my way into the town centre, but I was not permitted to pass, not unless I had a ticket. One of the police officers was a woman I had met before, who worked at the PSB Foreign Affairs Office. “But I am walking into the town centre,” I objected.

“You have to go around the other way,” was her response. This added a kilometre or more to my route and predictably I was not happy with this arrangement, which continued for the next few days. It did, however, lead me past the Tashihunpo Monastery: more of this later.

Once I was in the town centre, I was astonished to see an army squad go by, all dressed in riot gear. Now, apart from some pretty lunatic driving, I had not seen any riotous behaviour at all in Shigatse, though I can imagine that a folk music festival might result in some drunkenness and bad manners. The Chinese were not leaving anything to chance. I surreptitiously took a photograph of the group, who probably would not have been pleased to pose.



I saw this and similar squads often when I was in the town centre. This would leave the local population with little doubt as to who was in charge.



## Accident near Shigatse

My explorations of Shigatse revealed some interesting contrasts. Firstly, much of the town was built of typical Chinese concrete-and-white tile architecture, with wide streets and quite a lot of bunting for the music festival. Here is Shandong Lu. “Shandong”, for those who don’t know, is a seaboard province of China.



For most Chinese, this is their idea of perfection. No doubt there is piped water, deep sewers and electricity. You can drive your car at high speed down the road without much impediment. The people who live here are mostly Chinese. Then I went to explore the “Old Town” – the Tibetan quarter on the north side of town.



Here, there were few cars speeding down the streets, most of which were unpaved, narrow and full of Tibetans. Indeed, the majority of vehicles were either bicycles or donkey carts, but mostly people were walking. Nearby were some interesting markets, selling furniture and quite a variety of antiques. I perused the displays carefully, noting some of my favourite things for sale:

## Accident near Shigatse

antique padlocks. I resolved to buy one or two, but not at the prices they were asking. Of course not. Also, there were some Buddhas, one of which would go well in my digs back in Chengdu.

Turning up a side alley, I found myself in the residential area of the Old Town. There was no provision at all for motor transport, nor was it deep seweraged. I could tell there was no sewerage because the ditch down the middle of the street contained a trickle of waste water, sourced from PVC pipes coming from inside the houses through the mud-brick walls.



This part of town had particularly attractive architecture at street level. The main difficulty was the lack of sanitation, which in a way you think could be attended to by putting some 100mm PVC sewer pipe in the drains, hooking it up with the pipes emerging through the walls, and covering it all with cobblestones. That, however, would not have occurred to anyone. If anything, the probable “solution” would be for the entire district to be demolished and replaced with blocks of concrete-and-white-tile flats like Shandong Lu, as is the norm in China.

After walking through the Old Town, I came to the Shigatse Dzong, at least, what is left of it. An impressive palace similar in style to the Potala Palace had been there until 1959. All that now exists is some ruins, which I climbed and explored. There was something of a view over the Old Town but of the Dzong itself, little remained. Not even a tiny plaque existed to tell me what had been there, or why it disappeared. Lonely Planet has something to say though.



## Accident near Shigatse

In 1959, the Tibetans tired of the Chinese occupation and revolted. One of many centres of Tibetan resistance with the Shigatse Dzong, which the Chinese dealt with by aiming artillery at it, and consigning the building and its defenders to oblivion. You would think they would build a large monument here to celebrate this “Liberation” as well.



**Ruins of Shigatse Dzong overlooking the Old Town**

Over the years, many Chinese have told me how much aid their country gives to Tibet: that they build roads, hospitals, schools, cities and provide all sorts of fresh food at great expense.

My observation is that the “aid” that flows to Tibet is all to assist with the occupation. The hospitals are built for the army, the paved roads and sanitation are all for the benefit of Chinese occupiers and their families, the schools cram Communist Propaganda down the throats of their children, while the fresh fruit and vegetables are for the stomachs of the army, police and their families.

I received a message from Ms Rong. Since her return to Chengdu, she had been preparing for a petroleum engineering consultancy placement in Russia. She was presently in Beijing, where she was reviewing data while waiting for a visa to go and work somewhere in Siberia, doing digital modelling of an oilfield. This was her particular and quite valuable work skill. She told me she would come to Tibet and help resolve my problems with the authorities. Though I would have preferred the assistance of Ms Wang (who had studied law), Ms Rong’s presence would be more than helpful. Firstly, she would fly to Chengdu, which has the best transport connections to Tibet.

While wandering back through the town centre, my mobile phone rang. It was my brother Jim, calling from Australia. I assured him that thus-far all was well.

## Dealing with the Police

It was Saturday morning, and the police told me that they were now prepared to take me to see the accident site. Though I had taken notes, photographs and video on the evening of the accident, it had been dark and I had not had an opportunity to look at the scene closely. The police van, complete with Superintendent Zhao Gang, driver and interpreter, picked me up at the Friendship Hotel, then we drove past the PICC offices and out of Shigatse.

The driver proceeded quite slowly, surprisingly slowly really, at about 65kph. Normally people drive rather faster than this. The road was incredibly lumpy and the vehicle bucked all over the place, as its shock absorbers were obviously not functional. The road had not been this bad in my near-new van. Even at this snail's pace driving, it was not very long before the nineteen kilometres were covered. We pulled up on the western approaches to the village by a prominent speed-limit sign indicating "30". The interpreter told me that I had been speeding by my own admission, as I had given my speed in my written statement as 35. I was thus 100% at fault for the accident.



I got out and went to have a look at the sign. All around were signs of fresh disturbance and the concrete was still very dark and had only been cast during the past day or two. Grassy sods that had been dug out were still green, and the worker's footprints were still obvious here and there. "But this sign has just been put in!" I exclaimed to the interpreter. He spoke to Zhao Gang and the three of them went into a huddle.

At that moment, a Party convoy came through. They were led by a white Toyota Landcruiser with the usual red-and-blue flashing lights on its roof, travelling at maybe 100kph, certainly vastly in excess of the posted 30kph limit. There was one safety precaution that the entire group of maybe ten vehicles implemented: they sounded their horns long and loud. The police took not the slightest bit of notice, not one iota.

## Dealing with the Police

“The sign was put in for a visit by the Panchen Lama in June,” was their explanation. This was a transparent lie, the sort you are expected to believe all the time in China. I did not believe it for a second. I produced my camera and photographed the sign, its footings, the grass sods, the police and the village in detail.

Despite my pointing out all of these details to the police, showing that the sign had plainly been installed very recently, they would not retract the Panchen Lama story. “We must leave now,” I was told.

“Is there a sign at the eastern side of the village?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“I want to go and have a look at it.” I had no recollection of seeing speed limit signs on the approaches to villages in Tibet, not here or anywhere else. I rather doubted if they had gone to the trouble to put one in on the east side.



**Base of sign with still-curing concrete and workers' footprints all about**

“No, there is nothing to see. We have to go now. This car has been borrowed and has to be returned (Another blatant lie).”

“It is essential that I see the other sign,” I insisted. The police were emphatic that they had to leave. “It will only take five minutes.” Still, they would not budge. I had to suspect they were hiding something.

“Get in the car – we must go.”

“No, I will stay,” and I opened the door, removing my daypack from their vehicle. “I will walk.”

It was the better part of a kilometre to the village and the site of the accident. Some of the marks were still on the road and I took the opportunity to record the scene with the benefit of some light and without crowds of people everywhere. Then I continued on through the village, wondering what I might encounter on the other side. None of the villagers took the slightest interest in my presence. I guess they had seen quite enough the previous Sunday evening.

Slightly to my surprise, there was a 30kph sign on the eastern approaches to the village. It was also plain why the police were so reluctant for me to see it. In this case it was glaringly-obvious that the concrete had been mixed very recently, as it had been done on the road and was not even slightly scuffed. Quite likely the job had only been done the previous day.



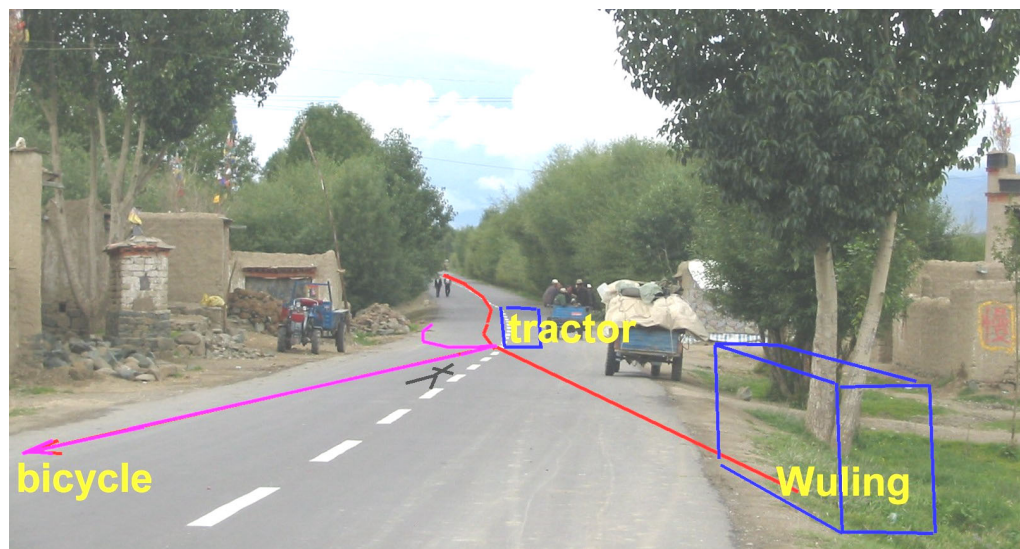


**women walking along the highway with their backs to the traffic**

There were also disturbed sods, still with green grass. The sign had been planted there since the accident. Quite possibly that was why Superintendent Zhao Gang had been unavailable for the previous couple of days: he had been busy concocting evidence.

A couple of peasant women walked by, each carrying a basket piled high with grass. Rather than walk on the edge of the road, facing the traffic, as we would expect in the motorized West, they treated the highway like a footpath, as you can see in the picture, walking in the middle of the lane with their backs to the traffic.

From the east side, I then walked back into the village, stopping at the scene of the accident to get a daylight picture. Later, I added some lines to give a better idea of what had happened.



The red line shows my path, while the purple is that of the bicycle. The parked tractor is in a similar position to the one I was avoiding, except that it was facing the other way and was almost in the middle of the road, as shown with the blue square.

I continued my walk through the village, by now having attracted a large group of children. They followed me along, running back and forth onto the

## Dealing with the Police

road, not taking the slightest care for their safety. I could see another accident happening and tried very hard to shoo them off the road. This only made matters worse. I continued my walk out of the village, towards the western end where I had left my police escort.



When I returned, the police predictably had flown the coop. I had another look at the sign, then had to think about how I was going to get back into Shigatse. Hitching seemed the best way. I stood on the side of the highway, waving to passing vehicles. Very soon, a little van driven by a man with his wife in the passenger seat, stopped and picked me up. I supposed they were operating a taxi service, though there was no evidence of this, such as other passengers. The back of the van was mostly full of bags and boxes. Maybe they had some business. In any case, they refused to accept payment.

As we were driving towards Shigatse, we overtook the police. They seemed to be dawdling along, probably in some deep conversation about what to do. The investigating officer would have been in a quandary, as I had taken irrefutable photographs of the scene. I suppose they do not have such well-equipped suspects in the usual course of their business, nor suspects who are prepared to challenge their findings.

Keeping my head low, I stayed in the van until well after the turnoff to the police station, then chose to get out on a side street where the police would not see me as they drove into town. I wanted them to think I was still out at the scene. I also wanted to attend to some business before they had a chance to cover their tracks, involving a call to my boss in Chengdu.

Within minutes, I was on the phone to my boss, Ms Yang. I explained to her that I had just accompanied the police to the village and that it was obvious that they were manufacturing evidence. I needed her to do something immediately to get Superintendent Zhao Gang removed from the case. She said she would contact the Foreign Affairs Office in Lhasa *poste haste*. I also received a text message from Ms Rong. She was flying to Tibet on a military aircraft and would arrive in a few hours.

## Rong to the Rescue

Ms Rong had some difficulty finding the Friendship Hotel. No taxi driver seemed to know where it was, and only after an exchange of text messages was she at the front gate. I showed her the room I had been sharing with three other men, suggesting that we continue with this arrangement.

“I am not sharing with two other people in the room,” she said. Off she stomped to the office, to be told that if we wanted a room to ourselves, we would have to pay for all four beds, each costing 30RMB per night. Ms Rong wanted to move, right away.

I was not so keen. The people I had shared with had been supportive and good friends but now I was leaving without even the formality of saying goodbye.

We went for a walk down the street, past the oft-frequented restaurant, and just opposite was a Tibetan hotel. The façade was all white tiles, and in the middle was a gate. If I ever got the car back, we would have secure parking. In fact, all hotels in China have secure parking. Rong checked out the price and negotiated 40RMB for an entire room containing four beds. This was a much better deal than the Friendship Hotel. Of course there were no bathroom facilities. The only running water came from an urn outside room, perched on the balcony balustrade.

Do not ask about the toilets. I will tell you. The toilets at the Friendship Hotel left a bit to be desired, not having any doors on the cubicles and it being somewhat open to view from outside as well. When you squatted, other users would get to see you doing your stuff in profile view. The good side was that it was all white-tiled and an automatic flush operated occasionally, removing all the doings in one go. For the cubicles divided up a single, long trench into which all and sundry deposited their wares collectively, to be collectively flushed. This is a great arrangement if you like your public toilets to be very public. I know not for sure where the flushings went, but I would guess a nearby stream would have been suitable.

The toilets at our new, Tibetan hotel were not for the squeamish. A walk across the courtyard would take you into a dark little room with a couple of slits in the wooden floor. There, you could squat and discharge your bowels into the void below, a void filled with turds. There was no chance of the floor giving way or otherwise falling in, but the downside was that many of the users missed the slit in the floor. Some missed so badly that it seemed that they had ventured into the unlit space at night and just performed the task anywhere. What I say about the toilets really only holds for the men’s facility. At night, I would sneak into the ladies’, which was much better. Tibetan women seem to have got this squatting and aiming skill better honed than the men. After a few days, Ms Rong quietly told me that I had to use the men’s room. Someone must have observed my surreptitious midnight visits.

My first night’s sleep was seriously disturbed, not by Ms Rong’s romantic attentions, but by a dog. Tibetans like to have guard dogs, and the bigger,



## Rong to the Rescue

more sadistic and louder, the better. Of course I had not noticed the animal when we checked in, nor at bed-time, but late at night. All night, the animal chained up below would go completely berserk at every passing car, bicycle, pedestrian or breeze. The next day, we requested a room as far from the dog as possible.

After our disturbed Saturday night, it was time to work out what to do vis-à-vis the traffic accident. Ms Rong suggested we revisit the village without the pleasure of police companionship and look at things a little more closely. She could use the opportunity to ask the villagers. The best way to get there was to charter a van and shortly we were at the familiar site. The van driver was the first to tell us that the signs had only popped up in the past few days, and what he said was recorded on videotape. So too, was the evidence of several villagers, who did not know that Ms Rong was with me, as I hid in the van.

On the whole, I had done a fairly effective job with the photos the previous day, despite the attentions of the police. However, while snapping the approaches to the village as I saw them a week earlier, a man cycled by. He followed exactly the path I was on in the seconds before the collision, which I duly recorded. The last picture was taken when the cyclist was at about the impact point with the cyclist. There was a tractor parked opposite.



Unfortunately, the boy cyclist was not this visible, but actually concealed by the trees on the right-hand side. And that was part of the problem: it was not obvious that there was a settlement until you were in it.

With that, Ms Rong and I returned to Shigatse. We felt pleased that we now had videotape evidence that the police had planted the signs a few days before.

On the Monday, we went looking for a lawyer. The list provided by the Australian Embassy was useless, the nearest one being in Shanghai or thereabouts. Someone local could be a lot more use, though I made it plain to Ms Rong that I thought Wang Xiaofeng would be the ideal person for the job. After some enquiries, we were in the waiting room of a lawyer, whose office was literally opposite the PSB. It took some time before we got to speak with him – more to the point, until Ms Rong spoke to him.

Though he had a quite presentable office, complete with an appropriate desk, polished wooden furniture, plants and a view out the window, one thing was a

little disconcerting. His entire legal library consisted of four books, each about an inch thick. Any qualified lawyer in the West would have at least a bookcase of references, if for no other reason than he would have to read a bookcase-full of books to pass his course. What the lawyer had to say was no more reassuring. "Do whatever the police tell you and do not dispute anything." If we did want his services, he wanted a deposit of 2000 RMB before he would even look at the case.

Feeling thus reassured, Ms Rong and I left his office, convinced that it would be a mistake to use his services. He sounded more like an agent for the police than someone who would be prepared to argue against them. Ms Rong had no idea whatsoever what the legal procedures might be, so we were both quite confused. We went to see Superintendent Zhao Gang, to find he was not in. He had gone to Lhasa.

Indeed, he was not in on Tuesday either, nor on Wednesday. Nevertheless, we were told that I could have my car back on Wednesday, there being only one little thing. They would test its roadworthiness.

Within the compound in which my car was being kept was a large and elaborate vehicle testing facility. The van was taken in and various parameters were tested using a computer installation, at the end of which I was told that my brakes were substandard. The front (disk) brakes were working at 60% of the theoretical ideal, while the back ones (drums) gave only 28% of the possible performance. Well, I always knew the Wuling had shitty brakes, particularly compared to the vehicle I had driven just before coming to China – a Volvo 940. I did have to wonder, however, how much better most other vehicles performed in China. And was this 28% figure real, or had they manipulated the calibration? I will never know.

With the examination complete, I was handed to keys and suddenly I felt free again, free from the burdens of gravity, sore feet and walking alongside dusty roads. There was a bit of a ding in the front where the bicycle had hit the car, and a tiny dent on the door pillar due to its impact with a human head. I immediately took it to have the brakes adjusted.

Opposite the hotel was an army base. I was in fact a lot closer to this one than that in Qinghai that had caused me so much bother. This one I could observe without much risk of being arrested and interrogated. Though it had a high wall around it and the usual guards at the gate, I was on the second floor and thus could see everything that was going on in the parade ground. I did keep my observations low-key, as I did not want a squadron of goons barging into the room. Neither did I get out my binoculars, nor did I take any notes.

Each morning started with a bugle call, "Reveille" presumably. Throughout the day, there would be bugle calls followed by young men lining up and doing whatever the orders barked at them required. Once a day, at least, they would jog out the gates, AK-47s at the ready, and go for a run around the block, prepared to deal with any insurrection. During the day, they would be marching around in their compound from time, but mostly it was quiet.

Probably the boys were asleep, like so many of the men in uniform in China for so much of the time. Late at night, the bugler would bid them all a pleasant night's sleep and then there would be silence until about 6am. None of the soldiers appeared to be women and I think we can be assured that none were Tibetans.

Now that I had the car back, we were free to explore Shigatse. One of the things I could not help but notice as we drove around the town was the profusion of military bases. For my own security, I did not write down their size and location on a piece of paper, lest I have another run-in with the military police. The only record was in my head. In the following week, I worked out that there were thirteen army installations scattered around Shigatse, a town of maybe 50,000 people.

The bases were easily recognisable, as each had a pair of armed guards in green uniforms out the front, standing rigidly to attention for the whole day. I would have liked to take their exact GPS coordinates and forwarded them to missile command in the USA, but this might have resulted in complications as well. If army bases are this dense throughout China, the Americans would need a lot more than their few thousand missiles to deal with the problem.

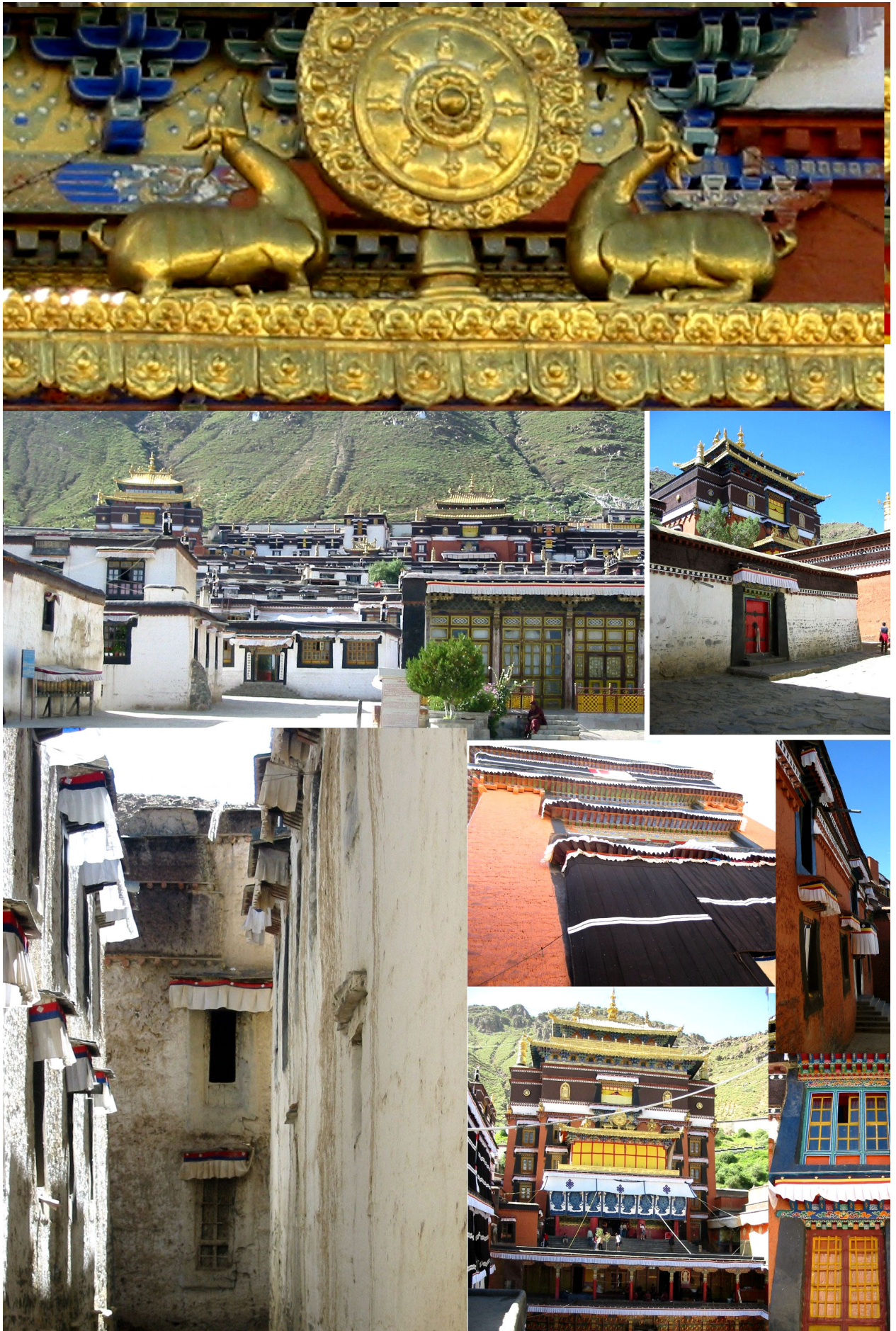
One of the places we visited was the Tashilhunpo Monastery, actually just up the end of the street in which we were staying. I had walked by this several times on the way to the PSB in particular, and to the markets. Outside, there was a long row of copper prayer wheels as are common throughout Tibet and West Sichuan, whilst inside was a marvellous complex of buildings. Rather than suffer the dust and sore feet, we drove, parking the car in the ample space near the front gate, paid 45 RMB per person for the tickets, and entered.

This monastery is the seat of the Panchen Lama. There are presently two Panchen Lamas, one of whom is recognised by the Dalai Lama, while the other is the son of some Party people and was emplaced by Beijing. The Dalai Lama's boy is in permanent custody and has not been seen for many years. For all we know, he might be dead.

The previous Panchen Lama (number 10) was recognised as the spiritual leader of Tibet by the Chinese, presumably because he was more pliant than the Dalai. He did, however, occasionally get the inclination to speak his mind, once telling Mao that the Chinese "had brought nothing but hardship and misery." For this, he was locked up for fourteen years in an effort to change his mind. After his release, he again criticised the Chinese and within three weeks had a "heart attack." The Tibetans believe he was poisoned.

So we entered the monastery. I cannot really describe this as well as I can show it with photographs, so here is a page to show you what it looked like. The buildings have been there for hundreds of years, are pure Tibetan architecture, and have been lovingly maintained. It is all such a contrast to the Chinese way of doing things.







Rong and I also exercised our retail therapy genes with a visit to the markets. To be honest, I think they were a greater attraction to me than her, as Rong had a shoe fetish. Rong could not pass a shoe shop without going in and trying on a few pairs, engaging the assistants in some idle chatter, and never buying any. This I felt to be a waste of everyone's time, particularly mine. I was not that interested in coping with a woman who had some sort of Imelda Marcos complex. I suppose Rong had nice feet, but you would think a woman with a Masters degree in Petroleum Engineering could find something better to do with her time. There was no fashion shoe shop at the markets.

I, on the other hand, am fascinated by old padlocks. It is strange that all over the world, people felt a need for padlocks. In the absence of anything else, they will prevent things going missing that you would rather keep, ensure that your suitcase is secure, or your door cannot be opened. Before the days of mass-produced factory padlocks, all sorts of marvellous devices filled the purpose. I was looking at one for which 45RMB was being asked. Similar ones in Lhasa were on offer for several times as much. It was of steel, had some inlaid design on it to pretty it up, then had a "device" which, when poked through a hole in the correct manner, would cause it to open. You might call this a "key", except that it bore no resemblance to a key, looking more like something you would use for cleaning out your ears, nose or perhaps performing an abortion. One was on display and they were asking 45RMB. I haggled and haggled but the price did not move and I ended up paying 45RMB. When you consider that a new padlock of similar dimensions will cost a similar amount of money, I don't suppose it was such a bad deal.

There were a few other things on display which I thought might be fun: a dirty old copper kettle, and some elaborate Tibetan trunks. Well, the trunks were a bit large and bound to be damaged on the long and bumpy return to Chengdu. The kettle joined my antique collection.



## A Trip to Gyantze

There was only so much that you could do in Shigatse. I had been there for nearly two weeks and had actually only ever planned to spend a few hours. We had done the markets, the Old Town, what was left of the Shigatse Dzong and the Tashilhunpo Monastery. The remainder was a grid of concrete streets lined with white-tiled concrete buildings as can be found in any part of China. Meanwhile, there was a nearby town of some historical, religious and architectural significance called Gyantze. I proposed to Ms Rong that we get a permit from the police to go there for a weekend.

All the while, we had been waiting for Superintendent Zhao Gang to come back from Lhasa. His absence was becoming protracted and Ms Rong told me that he was apparently in trouble over his planting of the speed limit signs. It is against the rules to do so without first getting some sort of clearance. I would have thought the problem was with planting evidence on an innocent party, but that is not unusual in China, nor indeed in most parts of the planet. Anyway, Superintendent Zhao spent the entire week in Lhasa, doing whatever his superiors were making him do. I hoped they were beating his bottom with a stick. His absence was a pain in the bum because we had to sit around and wait. By Friday we were getting very fidgety and wanted to get away for a while.

Our approach to the PSB for a permit went without a hitch. Of course, Ms Rong being not only Chinese but also a Party member did not need a permit, but I did, at a cost of 50RMB. As the car was full of camping gear, there was no need to plan or prepare anything much and by early on Friday we were on the new road to Gyantze. This had only just been completed and was opened the previous weekend by the Governor of Tibet. There was a brand spanking new hot-mixed road all the way from Shigatse to Gyantze, a distance of about one hundred kilometres.

You would think that a drive of a hundred kilometres on a brand-new, straight, beautiful and open road would only take an hour or so. However, we were in for some surprises.

All along the way, there were road-blocks, with long lines of vehicles waiting for trivial tasks to be performed. Much of this was to do with the white-lining, something you would think could be done without bringing traffic to a complete halt, well, anywhere but in China. We also observed that this newly-opened road seemed to be a storage area for all variety of construction materials, particularly stone, bricks and timber. There was so much of this lying about that again the traffic was brought to a complete halt in places. At the very least, you had to be quite careful, lest you whiz around a bend and find a huge pile of rocks on the road.

All along the road, too, were people. Frequently, a group would be sitting on the road, in the shade of a tree, having a picnic, playing cards or whatever. It was not always easy to see them, as they tended to blend into the shade quite well and they were completely oblivious to the danger they faced. Often too,

## Trip to Gyantze

there were children playing in the culverts, as these had ponds or streams nearby. Little boys, their willies waving wildly, would charge across the road without looking or thinking. There were also little girls, but they usually had their naughty bits covered and were less inclined to run in front of cars for no good reason.

Again, a convey of Landcruisers came speeding by, lights flashing, horns honking, otherwise not taking not the slightest care. I guess the Governor and his entourage do not have to worry with things like police investigations if they run down a few kids. Someone else will deal with the paperwork and they can continue on their way. Quite possibly there is a special law that says the pedestrian is always wrong if run down by the Governor's Landcruiser.

Speaking of the Governor, I could not help but observe that all the houses along the way, every single one of them, had a red Chinese flag waving above it. This was an aberration, as Tibetan houses usually wave coloured prayer flags. I guessed that someone in authority came along and gave them no choice but to take down their prayer flags and put up the Communist Chinese variety. This would presumably cause some rejoicing.

The route to Gyantze also had a few small towns along the way. These I approached with some care, as there were people milling around on the street in the fashion that is common throughout China – without the slightest concern about though traffic. As a driver, you just have to wend your way carefully through the crowds – or if you are a Party person, put your hand on the horn and charge through regardless.

One town I came to was more or less deserted, except for a tractor parked on the right-hand side of the road. This very suddenly, without looking or indication, executed a U-turn right in front of me. Fortunately, my brakes did the job and I stopped just in the nick of time. Getting the brakes adjusted in Shigatse had involved some argument, as the people in the workshop thought they were perfectly satisfactory as they were. Good thing I had taken the trouble to change their minds.

After eighty kilometres, the road ran out. Well, that was not quite the correct description of the matter. I could see bitumen stretching out in front, but we had to divert off into a village and along a dirt track next to a river. Apparently more white-lining was underway, even though the Governor had opened the road the previous weekend. Presumably it was only open for the Governor and his cronies and their doxies in swish Landcruisers.

A pole was laid across the dirt side-track in the nature of a boom gate. "Whatever could this be about?" I thought, as a man came out from a nearby house. After the briefest of discussions, Ms Rong told me that I had to pay a 5RMB "toll". Now, to pay a toll for the use of a road is normal in China, but to pay a similar amount to use a dirt side-track is getting a bit rich. Nevertheless, I paid and we were on our way, through the potholes, rocky bits, mud, slush, streams and all the rest that side-tracks in China can serve up. This continued for twenty kilometres, the last stretch being within sight of the



## Trip to Gyantze

Gyantze Dzong, a hilltop fortification on the other side of the river. As we reached the end of the side-track, another barrier was in place across the track, manned by two children. They wanted ten yuan to let me pass. This extortion I refused to pay and I simply removed the barrier and drove through, the children meekly accepting that I was not going to cooperate.

Actually, it seems that every Tom, Dick and Harry (or maybe Wu, Xu, Yu and Zhu) in China thinks he can set up a barricade across a road and charge people for the privilege of passing by. At this time, I found such behaviour outrageous, the people being villagers who saw an opportunity to tax some through traffic. Indeed, any town in China which sits astride a busy (or even a quiet) road treats it as a milch cow, drawing funds for whatever purposes they see fit. I think the money ends up mostly in the pockets of the local Party chiefs, who quite likely spend it on expensive cars.

After dealing with the two little boys and their pretend toll-station, we turned left. This was onto the main road, with its fresh new tarmac that had been opened by the Governor a few days before, then crossed the bridge and a minute later were in Gyantze. Our first stop was to be the hilltop fortification. The hilltop being a rather high one, we checked the map carefully and found a rear approach road that apparently went all the way to the top. This would save a lot of clambering up the slope, which was several hundred metres high. The only difficulty was in finding the entry to the approach road, hidden somewhere in the maze of back alleys that is Gyantze's Old Town. Mr Lonely Planet did not show precisely where it was and Ms Rong had to make a few enquiries before we happened upon the route.

The Old Town was a morass of mud and piles of granite dimension stone. The authorities were actually in the throes of paving the main drag with granite cobbles, but in the usual manner, were doing it all at once. Rather than do the job in sections, they started by pulling up all the old road, then bringing in the unhewn stone. Now many stonemasons were cutting the stone to size, then something else would happen. All of this would mean chaos for many months. An alternative approach would be to pull up smaller sections and replace them with the cobbled road within a week or two. Little bits of the town would be inconvenienced for a few weeks rather than reducing it all to a shambles for months,

To find the rear access, we had to go off the main drag, along a parallel back lane. This was utterly unpaved and had quite a mess of a mud-sewage-cow poo mixture where there was not dust. Many houses had a cow moored to the front door, handy for when you needed some fresh milk to add to your coffee or Weeties. Maybe Gyantze needs an urban milk delivery service to help clean up the streets.

## Trip to Gyantze



**Cows hanging out, waiting to be milked**

In the middle of this shambles was the access road, actually a quite unlikely-looking track between two buildings. Once on it, it was very steep and I was quite concerned that we would come to a halt part-way up. If that happened I would have to reverse a long way back along a narrow track with a dramatic drop on one side. Mercifully, the little van and particularly its clutch, gearbox and differential stood up to the abuse and shortly we were at the top.

“What of the Gyantze Dzong?” you might ask. Well, this was the site of one of Britain’s less celebrated forays in the “Great Game.” Without going into great detail, it is where a battle was fought between the British Army and the Tibetans in 1904. The British invaded Tibet because they were concerned about Russian intentions in the area, as everyone from the Tzar down kept saying they wanted to wrest India from the British. Rumour had it that the Dalai Lama (number 13) had come to some accommodation with the Russians, who would then be able to sweep into India along a front stretching from Afghanistan to Burma. Perhaps understandably, the British were keen to avoid such a scenario.

During the summer of 1904, the British invaded from Sikkim, fighting some very one-sided battles with the Tibetans and soon found themselves at Gyantze, with the Tibetans ensconced up above and armed with muskets. The British had Lee-Enfield 303s and Maxim machineguns, plus some artillery. Guess who won.

It did not help the Tibetans one iota that the British artillery scored a direct hit on their powder magazine, destroying much of the fortification and leaving them without ammunition to boot. According to the Chinese, they were

## Trip to Gyantze

reduced to hurling rocks at the British. Brave men, throwing rocks at troops armed with 303s.

Ms Rong and I alighted from the exhausted little van and went into the Dzong, paying the 25 RMB entry on the way. This was a very modest fee compared to many attractions in China, though I suspect the it has long since been brought into line with those being charged elsewhere, ie exorbitant.



### **Gyantze Dzong from our campsite by the river**

Walking around in the ruins of the Dzong, there really was not much to see, as the British had blown up most of it. There was, however, a museum celebrating the British invasion, rendering a highly-coloured account which I am sure would be rejected by any serious historian as being Communist Propaganda. It is marvellous how the Chinese destroyed a similar structure in Shigatse in 1959 but have failed to record the fact in any way, shape or form.

I actually spent rather more time in the museum than in the ruins. It was quite interesting, even the propaganda, which was considerable. I recall there being a poster display in Pidgin English and I guess it was also there in Chinese and Tibetan. The English posters were photographed for comparison with the true story. After Tibet becomes an independent nation, I am sure they would like to have a more accurate description of the events and of the causes, ie the Russians and their Great Game. I would also like to see some monstrous museum erected with a blow-by-blow account of all the evils the Chinese have committed in Tibet. Maybe just some of the evils would be enough, as you don't want your patrons cutting their wrists in the galleries.

The leader of the British expedition was a gentleman called Francis Younghusband. He later went on to occupy Lhasa, where he and his men were frustrated by the lack of a Dalai Lama to talk to, by the cold and poor provisions. They waited around a couple of years, Younghusband had a mysterious religious revelation and the British left. Thereafter, from 1906 to



## Trip to Gyantze

1950, Britain had a constructive relationship with the Tibetans and the Russians never invaded India. Younghusband devoted the rest of his life to promoting universal peace and love.



**The main street of Gyantze Old Town, filled with huge Tibetan courtyard houses. The light grey material in the street is granite, which was being hewn into flagstones.**

From the top of the Dzong there was a marvellous view of Gyantze, its valley, the old town and the nearby Gyantze Kumbum. However, it was getting late and we had to do something about some accommodation. We went back downhill and into the new town, where all the hotels were. Actually, there were only a couple of hotels and they were full, but this was not really a problem. The weather was wonderful and we had a tent and all sorts of gear, so really there was no difficulty with camping down by the river. There we would have water, plenty of trees to shelter us from prying eyes, and a rather greener environment than in the town centre.

Firstly, we had to purchase some provisions. After a couple of weeks in hotel rooms, I had little in the way of fresh vegetables or anything else. To this end, we found a grocery store in the main street and set about finding things to eat. Eggs, bread, milk, vegetables and rice came high on the list. Some of these things were hard to find, especially the milk and vegetables. With enough bits

and pieces to cater for the evening, we drove out to the bridge and then ventured along a riverside track to a place among some trees with a nice view.

Seemingly endless and pointless discussions followed, with Ms Rong raising all variety of objections to the location, but finally we had the tent up, the stove out and were cooking dinner. The view of the Gyantze Dzong was terrific. I could not understand Ms Rong's objections, except that we were in the middle of a brick works. A photo from the campsite is shown on the previous page. It is a pity that the British blew it up in 1904, levelling all the buildings in what is now bare ground in the middle.

In the morning, we woke to find some children hanging around. Further investigation revealed the brickyard proprietor, a youngish man who seemed a bit surprised to find a Western tourist camped amongst his wares. I do not believe it mattered much anyway – the bricks would take some weeks to dry in the sun, we were not about to steal them and we were not making a mess. He was actually quite delighted to have us as visitors.

Actually, as far as brickworks go, this one was one of the nicest I have ever come across. Usually they are a barren wilderness of claypits, stacked bricks and ovens, but this one was green, with grass and trees where usually you would find a hideous mess. I supposed the reason was that he did not fire the bricks. They were mud bricks, probably perfectly adequate in Tibet's dry climate.

After breakfast, Rong and I packed and returned to the town. The brick man seemed quite disappointed that we were leaving, giving the impression that he would have liked us to stay longer. The only problem with this was that we had things to do and also Ms Rong did not want to be in a brickyard any longer than necessary. We would go and look at the Gyantze Kumbum, a major religious edifice, the importance of which was a mystery to me and remains so to this day.

Arriving at the Gyantze Kumbum, we were welcomed by a garden full of the most amazing flowers. I am not sure that this would be any more amazing than in a Western town or city, but in China it sure is something very different. The Chinese do not do flowers, but the Tibetans do. Here are some dahlias, cosmos and marigolds to feast your eyes upon. Also, there are two of Tibet's most revered religious sites – the Kumbum (left) and Pelkor Chode.



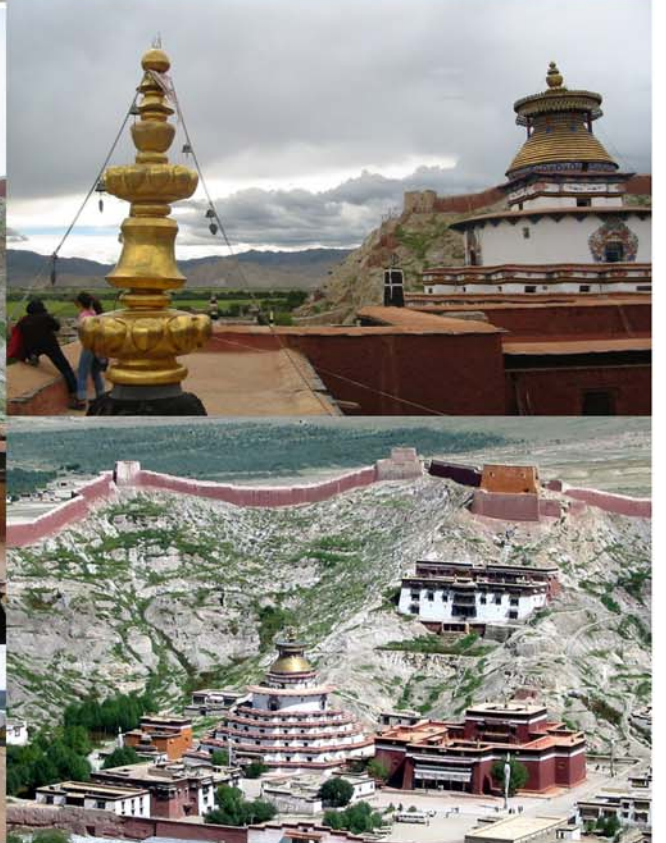
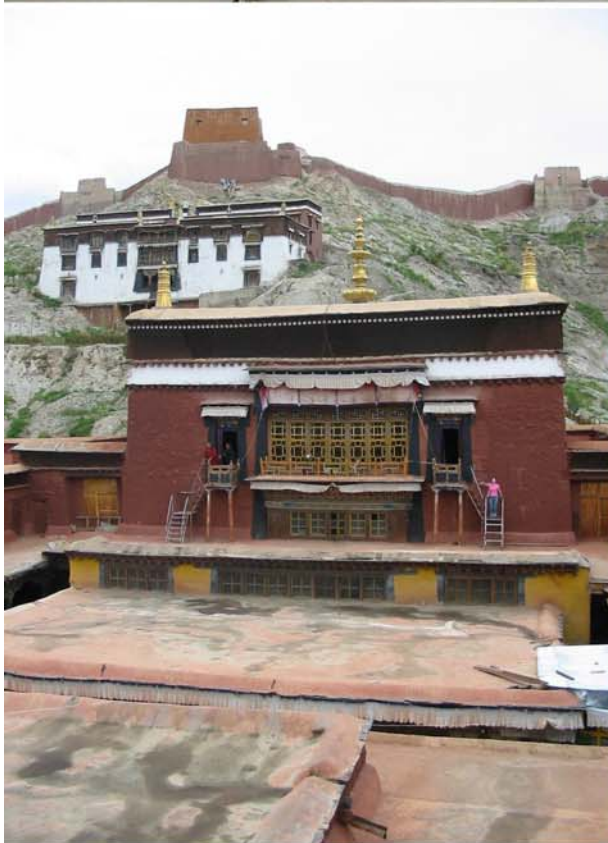
**Cosmos, dahlias, marigolds, Kumbum and Pelkor Chode in Gyantze**

After we had seen these two buildings, Ms Rong insisted that there was nothing more to Gyantze and that we should return to Shigatse immediately. I was damned if I could understand why, but I complied. Gyantze was not a large town and the most interesting part was an utter shambles.

On the way back to Shigatse, we passed another monastery, this one just a shell of its former self. During the Cultural Revolution, it had been ransacked and then burnt down by the Red Guards. The countryside of Tibet is littered with the ruins of monasteries from this era. The Chinese are not so generous as to erect signs explaining what they did at the time, or what happened to the huge numbers of monks who lived in them. Somewhere out there are killing fields where one day the true horrors will be revealed.



## Trip to Gyantze









## The Boy Wakes

It was a bit of quiet Sunday, with nothing much to do or see in Shigatse. It was the fourteenth day since the accident and Ms Rong and I were both sitting around, waiting for the police to come to some decision. She wanted to go to the police station, which I thought would be closed and that it would be more profitable to visit the boy in hospital. He had been in a coma for the two weeks since the accident on August 4th.

The police station was a couple of kilometres away on dusty roads and muddy footpaths, so of course we drove there. Arriving at the station gates, no-one was on guard duty and we went straight in. There were no police vehicles outside the main building, which was locked. Obviously nothing was happening for the day.

The investigation was delayed because of my complaints about police fabrication of evidence. The most glaring was the implantation of 30kph signs on either side of the village amid claims that they had been there since early June, but there were other issues. There seemed to have been some concoction of evidence by villagers who most likely did not see the accident, and also the matter of the boy's age, which was claimed to be eighteen but he was plainly quite a lot younger. I complained to my university about this, and they forwarded them to the Tibetan Foreign Affairs office. The investigating officer was called to Lhasa, where he had spent much of the previous week.



**The boy being tended by his brother**

From the police station, we proceeded to the hospital. Walking in, we found no doctors on duty and a sole nurse busy in an anteroom. Rong had a short discussion with her, then we went and peeked into the boy's room. He was still in the same position, with his father beside him as ever. We were hesitant to go in, but after a couple of minutes we did. I went to the bedside. The boy had a tube inserted in his nose for feeding and was covered in netting to keep the very numerous flies off his face. He swallowed occasionally. Then I noticed that his right eye was open. Firstly I thought that maybe his eyelid was lazy, but then I saw his eyeball was moving. He was looking at me. I waved and his eye followed me. I said hello, but there was no response. He was at least

semiconscious. At last he was coming out of his coma. It was like a small miracle, to see the boy coming to life when ten days previously I was convinced that he would die.



## The Boy Wakes

As on each of my past visits, I gave the father 100 yuan. We said goodbye and departed, the father coming out to see us off at the ward door. There was new hope.

The following day, I went to see Superintendent Zhao Gang and his interpreter. I had prepared a memorandum with my observations about safety hazards on the new Gyantze Road and wanted them to know my concerns and hopefully do something about it.

My memorandum listed about half a dozen unsafe practices, set out clearly on a page with the recommendation at the end that they mount a public safety awareness campaign.

The concerns included:

Children playing on the road and/or running across it without looking.

Piles of construction materials on the road.

People picnicking and playing card games in the shade of trees while sitting on the road.

Crowds of pedestrians walking along the road with their backs to the traffic.

A laden tractor executing a U-turn in front of me without looking or indicating.

Vehicles speeding around poor visibility bends on the wrong side of the road.

The interpreter explained my concerns to Zhao Gang, whose response was laughter and the statement: "But this is China."

## Monday conference with the police

At 10am Ms Rong and I reported to the police at the Public Security Bureau. In due course, the interpreters and investigating officer turned up, together with the father of the boy. We sat on the sofas and the investigator read his conclusions to us:- that the boy was primarily at fault due to his sudden manoeuvre with the bicycle, and that I bore some responsibility because my car's brakes were inadequate.

Protracted debates followed which no-one thought I needed to have interpreted for me. I could not establish what ratio of fault was attributed to myself and the boy. The medical costs were also open to question - it could be as high as 200,000 yuan, if the boy was a vegetable for the next 20 years. Somehow, all of this is supposed to be resolved at this stage by a police officer with some flimsy documents from the hospital.

Shortly, we went off to the hospital for a conference with the medical staff. The boy's father was my passenger, a rather unusual situation I thought, but we were both happy enough with it. We filed into the doctors' office, many cigarettes were lit, and a long discussion followed. The boy has a depressed fracture of the skull on the left side, has gained partial consciousness, but no-one could really offer much in the way of a prognosis. There was no suggestion that he could make a full recovery quite quickly. The worst case scarcely bears thinking about - that the boy might be bedridden for many years. At 1pm we left the hospital, having agreed to meet at the insurance company, PICC, at 4pm. There we could submit a claim to the company and see what they were prepared to pay.



Doctor's report and prognosis

## Conference with Police and Hospital

Ms Rong and I had a protracted lunch in the city centre, then went to the public showers. We arrived at the PICC a few minutes before 4pm. However, we had to wait quite a while before the police turned up and discussions between Ms Rong, the police, PICC and the PICC office in Chengdu continued until 6pm. The police and medical reports were faxed to Chengdu and in the end there was no answer on any particular issue. The possible cost was reduced to 103,000 yuan, but this seemed to presume that medical and other attention would cost just 5000 yuan per year - hard to believe in a rapidly growing China. I would think 1,000,000 yuan would be more realistic, but I did not volunteer that opinion under the circumstances.

The real difficulty was that PICC was incapable of offering the nationwide service its name implied. It was almost as though Tibet was a foreign country with which no communication or funds transfer was possible. All I could do was pay 20,000 yuan up front and they would (maybe) refund 95% of my approved expenditure when I got back to Chengdu. It is fortunate that the banks do business a bit more efficiently than this. Though I had a damages limit of 50,000 yuan, apparently PICC was only prepared to pay about 17,000 when the need was for much more. Considering that my premiums were higher in China than in Australia, and Australia had a far higher limit for personal injury liability (about \$5 million I think) you would think PICC could manage a much higher payout than a miserly 17,000 yuan. At the very least, PICC needs to offer a nationwide service. It is ridiculous that someone driving to another province would have to carry 20,000 yuan or more in cash, just in case they had a traffic accident. It is the job of the insurer to carry this risk, not the policyholder.



**Conference at hospital. The man on the left is the boy's father, while those in white coats and holding cigarettes are doctors**



## Leaving Shigatse

On the morning of August 21, the 17th day after the accident, Ms Rong and I attended another meeting at the Public Security Bureau. The investigating officer (Zhao Gang) read out his findings (yet again) in the presence of the father and I, in which the both the boy and I were found to have contributed to the accident. The boy was at fault because he had veered onto the road and I was at fault because my brakes were inadequate. I could not nail down anyone on the proportions of fault, but "no more than 40%" was mentioned for my part. My brakes were inadequate for sure, but this was a shitty little Chinese van, not a Volvo 940 with ABS. In lieu of a 20,000 yuan deposit, the police wanted a guarantee from the university. We went to the hospital.

There was a protracted conference at the hospital, the proceedings of which were again not translated to me. The boy was recovering consciousness but still had a long way to go. I paid over another 2000 yuan to help with ongoing medical treatment and then we went and called my boss about the matter of a guarantee. She said she could do something right away and would fax it to the Shigatse police.

Meanwhile, Ms Rong revealed a ruse that she had employed to cause the police some panic. She had told them that I had photographed and videotaped everything and posted it on the Internet. In some respects, this was true, as I had been in regular communication with a lot of people outside China and had sent some photographs. However, there was no web site as such containing downloadable photographs, video or even text. Her story had the desired effect though: the police behaved themselves.

Another visit was made to the PICC, with the same useless outcome. I took the opportunity to photograph all the documents in their folder, knowing that when the time came, they would doubtless not be able to find the file. Then we went off to the police to await the outcome. The father wanted to be reassured by the police that it was in order for me to leave Shigatse.

Long delays followed at the police headquarters. They were having a meeting, and this lasted until 1pm. Ms Rong and I had packed in anticipation that we could leave that day, but we were in for a surprise. The investigating officer was not happy with what he had received from the university and still thought I should deposit 20,000 yuan. Apart from the impossibility of this, I did not want to part with so much money when there was no guarantee that the insurance company would reimburse it.

Finally, the investigating officer decided on something else. He wanted my guarantee in writing that I would return to Shigatse. Sure I would. I took some writing paper and some carbon to make a copy, and I wrote three pages for their benefit. This took the better part of half an hour, with me busy writing while everyone else sat and watched, somewhat astonished. Ms Rong thought I had written two pages too many, but I thought I should make

a few points crystal clear. Once they had this statement, we were free to leave Shigatse.

We went out to the car and, without a moment of regret, headed out of town, to the east, towards Lhasa. Nineteen kilometres from Lhasa, we again passed through the nameless village and made an observation. The highway was swarming with children. I slowed to a snail's pace, sounded my horn and carefully picked my way through. I made careful note of this, later finding that no other village in the entire 3700km return journey had so many kids on the road. It was as though they were encouraged to hang out in the most dangerous fashion. Maybe, rather like the film "The Cars that ate Paris," these villagers were subsisting on accident damages claims.

*Discussion with Chinese colleagues after my return suggested that most villagers would regard it as a stroke of extreme good fortune to have a child seriously injured in a traffic accident, particularly if the driver was a well-to-do foreigner. The damages were the Riches of Croesus by their standards, rather akin to winning a lottery. After the claim had been settled, the child would be allowed to die.*

The other drama on my outward journey from Lhasa to Everest went by without notice. The road had been cleared of the debris flow that had caused hours of delay, while the diversion around a bridge no longer existed. Soon we were at the section that was between Lhasa and its airport: beautiful, wide, smooth road following the Tsang-Po Valley. All around were farms with their barley crops, now mostly harvested and stooked to dry. I had no recollection of stooks on the outward journey, three weeks earlier. With the blue sky dotted with puffy cumulus clouds, grey mountains in the background and lovely classical farmhouses among groves of deciduous trees, the scene was of unending beauty. In any case, it must be a short growing season, what with it now being only late in August. My new teaching year began on September 1<sup>st</sup>, so there was no time to waste. We had seven days to get back to Chengdu.

The afternoon passed quickly and by the early evening we were in Lhasa. We stayed in the same hotel as I had used on the outgoing leg of my journey, but in a double room with an en suite bathroom. Ms Rong negotiated this for a mere 100 yuan per night, rather a lot less than a Western tourist would pay. It sort of helps if you speak the language and are prepared to haggle.

The next day, we visited the Jokhang, which we entered without having to pay. We stood in line with the Tibetans and waited quite a while, until there was space. The reason you wait is because the building is absolutely packed – indeed, you could suggest that there are safety issues when thousands of people are packed into an airless and almost unlit wooden building with tens of thousands of candles burning in every conceivable nook and cranny.

## Leaving Shigatse

It was interesting though, a bit weird, and very spiritual. All of the people inside felt they were in communication with God, humming their endless “Om Padme Doom” or something like that. Ms Rong joined in, circumambulating all the holy shrines inside, of which there were many.



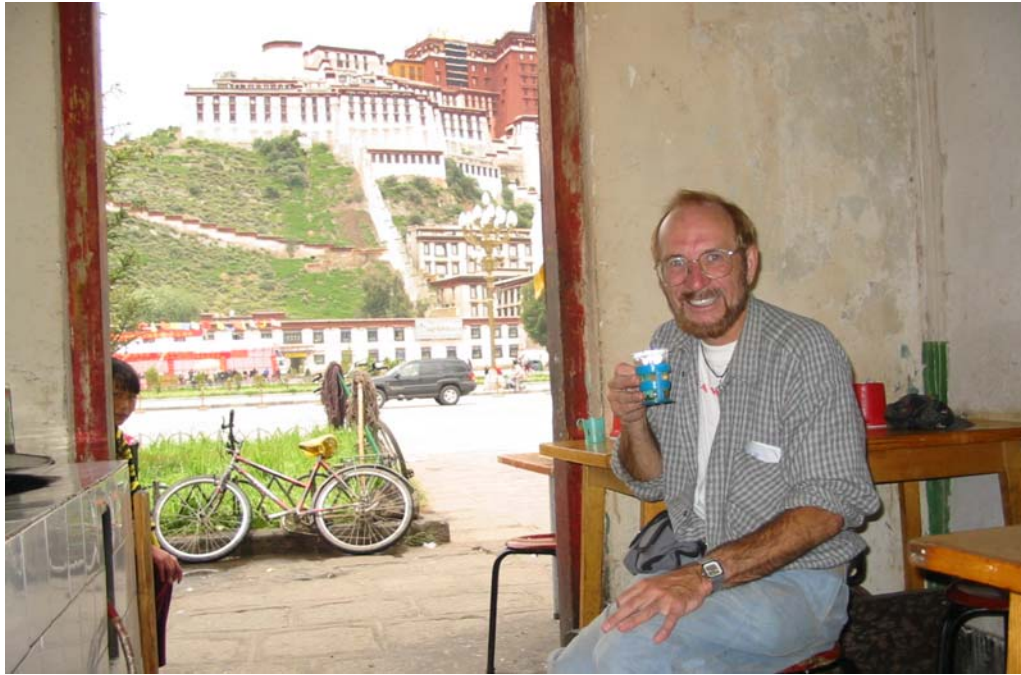
**Tibetan lads queuing at the Jokhang. Note their long hair, common with Tibetan men but an anathema to Chinese.**

Regrettably, it was out of the question to photograph the mumbo-jumbo that was going on inside, let alone videotape it. The whole place was a seething mass of sweaty, middle-aged and elderly women, leavened with a sprinkling of young men such as those above. Dozens of crannies held objects of great religious significance, about which all were performing their clockwise march, stopping to place their foreheads as close as possible to (mostly) images of revered and long-deceased holy men, or maybe gods. The spiritual aura even penetrated through the thick skin of someone like myself and I found myself closest ever to the meaning of God.

These thousands of minds, all chanting the same incantations, all with their minds focussed on the Nirvana, created a standing wave of electrical energy, of the aura of the human mind and existence. There are probably similar experiences to be had, in English, by attending certain Christian Church services. The Tibetan Buddhist experience is, without a shadow of doubt, older, more mysterious and most definitely weirder.

The Jokhang, even though it is a couple of thousand years old, is finite in extent and after a while we were outside, in the bright sunshine of Lhasa on a summer's day. There were other things to do.





**Drinking green tea at a Sichuan restaurant with a world heritage site in the background**

Not least of my needs was for lunch. For whatever reason, Ms Rong was not happy with the normal fare on which I had survived during my stay in Lhasa a few weeks before. I had eaten at restaurants catering to Western tastes, Western budgets and which had English menus. Ms Rong was, of course, perfectly comfortable with dealing with things in Chinese, paid Chinese prices, and preferred Chinese food to backpacker stuff. Some backpacker cuisine can be pretty awful, I must admit. Whatever, after endless driving around and argument, we settled upon a Sichuan restaurant right over the road from the Potala Palace. My recollection was of quite ordinary food, at very reasonable prices indeed, served in a restaurant that paid absolutely no attention at all to the view outside. There was no window onto the street and the best you could do, if you were a real eccentric, was to peep out the door.

A few seats outside, under the shade of an umbrella, would add to the ambience. So too would a coat of paint, proper crockery and some decent food.

I wanted Ms Rong to see the Potala Palace. Though it cost 80 yuan, we had saved quite a lot due to her good offices at the Jokhang, where we had been admitted for free rather than have to pay 45 yuan each. The down side of this had been that we had to wait in a queue, but with companionship such as we had, this was not a huge burden. Ms Rong was not, however, happy to spend so much money. "I will pay," I insisted.

"No, it is too much," she responded. And she was right. This was way too much, as much as you might pay in Europe or Japan to visit a building of great cultural significance. That, however, was not the point. She was in

## Leaving Shigatse

Lhasa and the monument to Tibetan Buddhism and particularly the Dalai Lama is the Potala Palace.

Maybe this was why she did not wish to go. In a way, visiting the Palace is an act of homage to the Dalai Lama and Ms Rong was a Communist. She was a big-C Communist, committed to the Party through thick and thin because it was the Party that gave her a job, money, privilege and some sense of power.

“I want to leave,” she told me.

“Now? Without seeing all of what Lhasa has to offer? You should take this chance – such an opportunity doesn’t come your way often.”

“I want to see my daughter.”

“But that can wait a day or two. It will take longer to get back here than it will to see the Potala Palace and the other sights around the city.”

“Let’s go now,” she told me, emphatically.

So we left the restaurant, walked out to the car, and drove out of Lhasa, back along the Chinese-style motorway lined with concrete buildings and up the valley towards Damxung and Nagqu. It was nearly four in the afternoon. We were leaving Lhasa, on some whim, leaving an inaccessible and beautiful city, without having much opportunity to appreciate it. Maybe I will return someday, one day.

The road out of Lhasa was excellent and we made good time, passing by farms where the barley harvest was underway. The verges and around the farmhouses were wooded with birch and other deciduous trees. The sky was mostly blue and the sun was shining. As we climbed up the gorge of the Tsangpo River, we were slowed by the ascent and thin air. The trees and barley gave way to grasslands dotted with yak and with a backdrop of beautiful mountains.

The erratic landscape in Tibet promotes the formation of many puffy cumulus clouds in the updraughts, of which there are many. These many clouds precipitate showers of rain, but sun-showers because much of the sky is blue. Driving north with the sun behind us, the showers of rain refracted the light to form rainbows. Given that there were many showers and much sun, we experienced almost continuous rainbow until after the sun had set.

Having been raised in the sunless city of Chengdu, Ms Rong had never experienced a rainbow. Indeed, she was so accustomed to the grey smog of the city that she found the experience of a clear blue sky rather strange. Many urban Chinese even consider a blue sky to be unnatural. But it was Ms Rong, with a Masters Degree in Petroleum, who on one sunny day pointed to the sky and asked: “What’s that?”



**One of the many rainbows seen  
crossing the Tibetan Plateau**

I looked up and could see clearly.  
“It’s the moon of course.”

“You can only see the moon at night,”  
she told me.

“You can see the moon during the day  
if it is up and the sky is clear.”

“No, you can’t. You can only see it at  
night.”

Anyway, Ms Rong quite enjoyed the  
rainbows, the likes of which she had  
never seen before.

The sun went down and it was time to  
find a place to camp. Some shelter  
would be a really good idea, as it was  
quite cold, we were at great height and

it was fairly windy. The road was not very cooperative though. For reasons  
which are beyond me, most rural arterial roads in China are built a metre or  
so above the landscape, making it very difficult to get off safely. It also  
makes it a real hazard if you accidentally drive off: you will almost certainly  
roll the vehicle. Only after some forty kilometres, when it was almost dark,  
did we find an exit into a village. There were many, many dogs, most of  
them barking and all likely to tear your leg off or give you rabies at the  
earliest opportunity. We camped a hundred metres or so out of the village.



## Crossing the Tibetan Plateau



**Village boy**

Despite their large and vicious dogs, the villagers were excessively friendly. In retrospect, they probably see quite a few foreigners passing by, though mostly on bicycles. A Western man with a Chinese woman travelling together in a van and camping in a little tent were nevertheless a source of some curiosity. Many of them (though not all) could speak Chinese and asked her all the usual questions about me and about our relationship. I cooked dinner in the usual Jamie Oliver fashion and the crowd – all women and children, no men – stood around and watched. Ms Rong found it quite cold and was wrapped up in the

greatcoat I had bought on the inward journey.

The villagers were quite obliging. One went so far as to wander off and fetch a thermos flask of boiling water, with which we prepared a hot drink. The chatter between Ms Rong and the women continued until quite late and everyone gradually returned to their homes, leaving us to ourselves. Just as we were turning in, another flask of boiling water turned up. That would be good for a wash in the morning.

An hour or so before dawn, I had to get up to have a leak. As I rose, I could not help but notice that the floor of the tent was floating in water. It was rather like being in a waterbed in fact, but the water beneath was freezing - literally. I opened the tent fly to find we were sitting in a puddle. Something would have to be done about that if we were to spend the remainder of the night in comfort.

It had snowed during the night, covering the landscape and the tent in maybe five centimetres of nice, white fluffy, freezing soggy stuff. It had also rained, and apparently quite heavily. I had quite inadvertently pitched the tent in a depression, the lowest point for quite some distance around, and the runoff had filled it. The tent was sitting in a freezing puddle.

All the while, I was barefoot. It was quite impractical to wear my runners in ten centimetres of water but it was very uncomfortable wandering about barefoot in the snow. I dug out my wellies and a shovel that I had bought in Shigatse on the fateful day and now was an opportunity to use it. In the dark and cold at about four in the morning, I shovelled snow and I shovelled mud,

## Crossing the Tibetan Plateau

draining the depression so that the tent floor no longer wobbled like a waterbed. It might have made more sense to shift the tent, but I thought the better of this, knowing that it would be more trouble to dig the slumbering Rong out of her bed than to dig a drainage trench. The digging dug, it was time to go back to bed.

One problem I had suffered before getting up was that I had been cold. Though we had adequate sleeping-bags, these were not particularly effective when deployed on air mattresses that themselves were floating in icy water. “Are you cold?” I asked Ms Rong.

A thin, pathetic voice answered: “Yes.” I thought she might be. I hunted around in the back of the van, found a couple of insulating sleeping-mats, unrolled them and had Ms Rong reposition herself while I installed one beneath her recumbent form. Then I did the same for myself. The mats made a huge difference and we had a couple more hours of sleep before being ejected from bed by a crowd of villagers. Most of the snow had melted, but it was still pretty cold.



The warm water came in handy for making some tea and as we warmed up, we were again entertained by the kids. A few of the older girls seemed interested in escaping their humdrum lives for something more exciting in the outside world. The younger ones looked as though they needed a bath. They were all sweet and lovely and I really wished I could speak Tibetan. Not the most useful language in the world, but the people sure were friendly. One French woman I knew lived in Tibet, married a Tibetan man and had done a Masters in Tibetan anthropology. Now there is true love for you. But the time had come to go. I wished we were not in such a rush.

## Crossing the Tibetan Plateau

The day was one of eternal frustration with the road. In the usual style of things, the road was being fixed, but while this was happening over several hundred kilometres, there was mud. I regret that the more extreme examples were not recorded for posterity, as I had to struggle with the steering wheel, gears and clutch, forever mindful that I could get very thoroughly bogged. Also, it rained. Extracting a vehicle from the mire in the freezing rain at an altitude of 5000 metres was not my idea of recreation.



As you can see, it was really four-wheel drive travel, particularly as there was so much and the above is a good bit. The men on the left are standing on the embankment for the new road: smooth, straight and devoid of mud. It is a tad frustrating coping with the conditions a few metres away when you could see this. It was, however, closed to traffic and would remain so until all two hundred or so kilometres were sealed, then it would be opened with a flourish. Meanwhile, everyone had to cope with the mud, the puddles, the treacherous stream crossings, the rocks and the bogs as best they could. This is what happens when no-one can express their discontent with matters by giving a vote to someone who promises some improvement.



**A village in the distance**

The relentless mud was occasionally punctuated with sunshine and dazzling views. The mountains here can be terrific in the sun, with their crenulations



## Crossing the Tibetan Plateau

and erosion gullies contrasting in the bright light. They are even better when there is a scattering of snow (but not too much) or some geology to insert some more interest. The mountains thoroughly dwarfed any human settlement.

When you were driving on sealed highway, it was a pleasure but you could be rest assured it would not last. “No oncoming traffic,” I would comment, knowing that somewhere there was a hold-up. Numerous hold-ups in fact, rather more than you would wish for.



This was one such queue that, as you can see, is mostly trucks. I had just driven straight past the trucks, up to the front. This may seem rude, but often a small vehicle can get through where a truck has to wait. Also, the trucks are deadly slow and this is a fine opportunity to get past fifty or so of them.



And this was what I was waiting for... well, not quite. A hotmix machine was busy around the corner. We patiently sat here for three hours, wondering what the devil we were waiting for. A few four-wheel drive vehicles actually charged off the road and into the dirt, but I was a bit circumspect about this, thinking I could get into heaps of trouble. If the way were blocked by

something a little Wuling could not cross, like a little creek or a little mudpool, I would be able to go no further and nor would I be able to get back up the little bank onto the road again. Climbing up and down these steep roadside banks is 4WD stuff.

Then we were off again. As I said, we were waiting three hours for the hotmix machine, but I could see not one jot of evidence of any hotmix. Maybe they thought they might do some hotmixing sometime, so held us up for three hours just in case. We went down the road and over a bridge, on the other side of which was a huge long line of trucks and cars that had also been waiting for three hours or more. What kind of organizational genius did this? I could not see but I thought a little wringing of necks might be in order. Anyway, the line of trucks coming south had to wait until the 50+ trucks going north had passed by.

We had at one juncture encountered four men in a Volkswagen Santana who were emphatic that they would be in Golmud that evening. This may be possible: it is after all an 1100 km journey from Lhasa to Golmud and we had already come about half-way. It does not allow for stoppages on the road though.

The road deviated onto a track and forded a river. In the distance was a long bridge that was no longer being used, a bridge that I had crossed a month before. Now one of its spans had collapsed, doubtless a bit of a surprise to whosoever was travelling over it at the time. I recalled my irritation at the bailey bridge exercise when travelling the other way, towards Lhasa. That was a different bridge, but China does have a lot of bridges which could have been built with better concrete, more reinforcing and had smaller loads put on them. Everywhere you go, there are bridges where only one vehicle may cross at a time. I guess that reduces both the possibility of collapse and the number of casualties. On one occasion I saw a bus unload its passengers, who walked over, and once they had crossed, were followed by the bus. Brave driver.

In the middle of the day, we came to the sprawling metropolis of Nagqu. I had been here before, even having had some running repairs done to the air conditioning before continuing south to Lhasa. Nagqu is a quintessentially Chinese town, full of concrete and white-tiled buildings, nice wide concrete streets, hordes of non-Tibetans and plenty of mud and rubbish. From here, a road heads east to Chengdu, a short-cut by virtue of which we could shave about 2000km off an otherwise 3700km journey. There was a price to this as well, which is that about 800km of the route was dirt road, but then we knew that a fair amount of the alternative route was pretty rough too.

Ms Rong asked around. First we stopped at the bus station and the bus drivers did not know the way out of town. Then we stopped at a taxi rank and asked a taxidriver or two and they did not know either. All the published maps showed a road heading east, towards Chengdu. Repeated enquiries got us nowhere, so we tried driving around the outskirts of town, looking for a six-lane freeway with neon signs pointing towards Chengdu Tower. We found nothing. Maybe it does not originate in Nagqu the way all the maps show it.

## Crossing the Tibetan Plateau

Maybe it begins in another town, or another country, or in someone's fevered imagination. We drove out of Nagqu towards Golmud, forgetting the possibility of a 2000km short cut. If no-one knows where it is, then it does not exist.

That night we camped overnight by the river. It was a very cold night, what with being at an elevation of 4901m, at 33 0643N and 91 52 56E. This was by the banks of a river and was the lowest point I could find, everything else being several hundred metres higher. I wanted to be as low as possible so we did not freeze in the morning and maybe the car would be easier to start. I had found that if you started and ran the car for about a quarter hour in the middle of the night, it was much easier to get going in the morning. The only explanation I could think of was that the computer control reset itself after about eight hours, leaving the car to imagine it was restarting at sea level.



Come the morning, I was up and about at the usual disgusting hour. Rong snoozed on, not caring to emerge until I had a hot drink prepared and the car warmed up. Then she moved to the car, where she sat in the sunshine, wallowing in comfort while I busied myself outside. Firstly it was a cup of tea, then breakfast, then I packed up the tent. Rong sat and warmed her tootsies in the front of the car, engine running and the heater

blowing warm air. It has to be said in her defence that there was really only one set of warm clothing, and the photo above is of me dressed for the occasion.

With everything packed, we were on our way. We passed through Amdo and past the policeman who had challenged me on the way into Tibet and now we were on the way out. No notice whatsoever was taken of me and the little van this time. The Tibet Tourist Bureau does not require payment to leave Tibet, only to enter.



**glacier and Kunlun Ranges from Tangula Pass**

As the day went by, we approached the Kunlun Ranges, a long line of mountains over 6000 metres high, all snow-capped and covered with glaciers,



finally reaching the Tangula Pass with its flagging and cold and blustery winds. We stopped and got out to admire the view and savour the fact that here we were leaving Tibet. On the opposite side of the valley, the Kunlun were covered in glaciers, with a particularly large one mid-field.

Come the late afternoon, we had not seen a truck or even a car for quite a while. This augured poorly. Something was afoot up ahead, something really serious. There was not much we could do about it. The road itself was beautiful, but it was new, actually new since I had travelled in the other direction. Up there in front, someone was building some beautiful road but causing a vast hiatus in the traffic as he, she or it did so.

Again, there was a long line of trucks and again I drove on past, up the left side of the road, to the top of the queue. A little van like mine can in any case squeeze into the space between two heavy trucks, so it really is not a problem.

The army was resurfacing the road. The army does lots of things in Tibet because no ordinary Chinese in their right mind would go there. You have to be fit to cope with the high altitude, and for women, they probably cannot conceive, or at least cannot carry a child to term. There are no vegetables or fruit, nor are there any pigs. It is cold and desolate and except for the desperate few who want to get ahead in a frontier environment, the lowlands of China offer a much more congenial environment. The army can send fit young men far away on an assignment to make things secure for the motherland. One such security measure is the building of nice arterial roads so they can send tens of thousands of truckloads of troops here and there to cure any dissident feelings among the Tibetans. It was six in the afternoon, and it would be light until nine.

In the distance, another hotmix device was busy turning roadbase into the most delightful surface. The problem was that it occupied the full width of the road so normal mortals like us could not get through. Rather than do a half-width and allow at least one-way traffic to filter past, the army does not have to consider the emotional well-being of road users at all. They just stop all traffic and only allow traffic to pass whensoever it suits them. This turned out to be many hours.

A stream of trucks was using a side-track, actually a service track for the construction of the railway to Lhasa. I had been here before, exactly, with the two monks while coming the other way. Rather than wait for the army, I thought it would be a good idea to use this rough-and-ready access to get around the construction work ahead. I drove off the main road, along a track and was faced with a large number of heavy trucks coming the other way.

The track was quite narrow and definitely the only navigable route through the rough and rocky landscape. There was the half-completed railway embankment as well, but that looked a real challenge and in any case was the focus of a fair amount of construction activity. Best to stick to the track. Until...

A truck had become very stuck in a dip. The depression it was crossing was sharp, but the truck had a long tray and had become hung up with its drive wheels spinning in the air. I pulled over to one side and went over to have a look, wondering if I could think of some magic solution to the problem. No. It was beyond me. Maybe some other expert could do better. I sat and waited and explored the terrain, including the railway embankment. The railway was out of the question because such huge boulders were used in its construction. No-one had thought to design it for a second use as an emergency road bypass while the army was resurfacing the road.

Beyond the stuck truck, everything was absolutely hunky-dory. If I could pass him, I could drive right up to the main road, downstream of the hotmixer, and continue on my merry way to Golmud. The truck, however, remained irrecoverably stuck, despite the considerable efforts of other big trucks with substantial towing cables to drag it out of its predicament. For it was not just me but quite a lot of other vehicles, mostly heavy trucks, which were inconvenienced by the situation. A few of the biggest and bravest trucks drove around the problem, but they had far more clearance than me, far bigger wheels and the drivers did not own their vehicles. They drove over very rugged and sizable boulders, over broken stone and bulldozed rocks and did so at the peril of disembowelling their engines, differentials or gearboxes. All my running gear was much lower and of much lighter construction. I still had a brazed oil filter as witness to the hazards of such activity.

After waiting around an hour or more, I gave up. It would be better to be back there, at the head of the queue, should the army decide to let people through. Nine o'clock had been suggested as a possible opening time, only an hour hence. I drove back along the service track, to encounter a squadron of heavy, six-wheel-drive trucks coming the other way, loaded with hot mix ready to put into the machine.

These shiny new trucks were driven by army men, in natty uniforms with gold braid on the epaulettes of their crisply-starched shirts, and wearing ties (and probably shiny shoes). To be a driver in the Chinese army is a high-status job, so much so that he has two assistants sitting next to him. I guess the driver never has to get out and open the tailgate of the tipper, check the oil and water, or kick the tyres. What other use would he have for two assistants, sitting there in their starched shirts, gold braid and ties as well? A dozen or more of these trucks slowly moved by, each one piled high with fuming loads of mix ready for application. I had no idea whatsoever how they would cope with the stranded truck problem in front of them: perhaps they would terminate the driver with extreme prejudice.

We returned to fairly well the same position in the queue that we had abandoned an hour or so earlier in our quest for instant gratification on the getting-past-the-roadworks business. No-one seemed to mind. After sitting there for a while, Ms Rong went off to enquire as to when the way might open for we travellers to pass. "Maybe midnight" was the answer.

Well, the opening time had slipped three hours in the past three. I was not anxious to sit around all night, waiting for whenever some goon was about to let us through. There were other things to do, such as going and pitching a tent, cooking a meal and having a good night's sleep. Maybe in the morning the problem would have resolved itself. I did a U-turn, proceeded less than a kilometre back along the queued traffic and took a track off into the wilderness. Here we might find peace and quiet and just relax our way out of this impasse.

Sure enough, there was a comfortable enough place in a bit of shelter, just beside a pond. Maybe "pond" is not quite the word. It was a pool of water in a gravel pit, but it looked a likely place to wash dishes in the morning. You do have to worry a bit about water quality in China, even way out on the Tibetan Plateau because people shit in it. This lot looked OK, but my eyes are not sharp enough to see *cryptosporidium* or other nasties in the water. It is best to boil anything you drink or use in your cooking. Anyway, I knocked up a meal, we pitched the tent and settled in for the evening, such as was left of it. We had a sound night's sleep, without the disturbance of trucks and roadworking machinery and it was a lot more comfortable sleeping on air mattresses than in a van waiting for the lights to change.

First thing the next morning, I was awake and made myself a cup of coffee. A nice cup of filter espresso is the sort of thing you need to start a day driving over the Tibetan Plateau. Gradually, gradually, Ms Rong was stirred from her slumber, we breakfasted, the bedding and tent were packed away and we proceeded back to the road.

There was still a long line of trucks awaiting the 463<sup>rd</sup> PLA Roadworks Brigade. Closer inspection of them and the cars parked at the head of the queue revealed that these were a different set of transport devices to those we had been with the night before. Ms Rong asked about and established that the army had allowed traffic to pass at some weird hour of the night. Since then, a long, long line of trucks had arrived, earnestly expecting to be allowed to pass sometime during the coming day.

Ms Rong was not happy with this and went off to have a confab with the Army powers-that-be. She was gone quite a while and I was left on my lonesome, wondering when we might get to pass. A couple of army officers came out from the building Rong had entered and approached the taxi behind. They instructed the passengers to get out, which they did, together with all their baggage, and sat beside the road. Then the officers commandeered the taxi, jumping in and heading off south, goodness knows where. I never saw the taxi or the officers again and I don't suppose the passengers did either. Good thing they took their baggage out, as it gave them something to sit on and a supply of warm clothing if the weather became too challenging. Such are the vagaries of life in Chinese-controlled Tibet.

Another army officer approached my vehicle, indicating that I should turn around and drive him back along the road. I responded by enabling the central locking so he could not get in. He banged on my car a few times, shouted and



gesticulated, tried to open the doors and windows, then gave up and told someone else where to take him. Meanwhile, I had to wonder what Ms Rong was up to. Her disappearance into the army mess was becoming protracted – in excess of an hour – and I was considering whether she had been arrested or abducted. Should I go in and find out? Well, no, not here. After my experience with the army in Qinghai, I was not about to barge into the mess. I might end up in prison, especially as I had no permit to be in Tibet in the first place. I waited and waited. She was exercising her charm in there, or maybe just having a good time.

After two hours, a smiling and relaxed Ms Rong emerged from the mess with a quite handsome young officer in tow. Cradle-snatching methinks, as the officer looked all of nineteen and Rong was 35. She brought him to the van and much against my better judgement, installed him in the vehicle. We were taking him down to where the hotmix machine was doing its job. The barrier went down, we drove along about a kilometre of beautiful new road, and the officer got out. Much to Ms Rong's disappointment, we then were expected to return whence we had come. Bugger. She obviously thought that her charm and good looks deserved more consideration than this. We went back to the top of the queue and settled in for a long wait.

One device I carried in my glovebox were some binoculars. While sitting in a car out in the middle of nowhere with a group of indolent men laying hotmix a kilometre ahead, they were quite useful. We could see exactly what was going on down there, even though the optics were Russian. Yes, they were laying hotmix, but from time to time the machine left the road to take on another batch. During these breaks there was no particular reason why traffic could not pass by.

"Why don't they just let people pass?" I asked rhetorically. "We could just go down there and drive straight through."

"If you try to go past, they might shoot you," was her answer.

"But we could go by right now. There is no reason for us to wait here."

"You should obey – it is the Army giving the orders."

"We have been sitting here for hours and there is no need. Why don't you see if we can pass through?"

After a bit more discussion and argument, Rong admitted that she did not want to sit in the place all day. She went and had a talk with the traffic control person and handed him the binoculars to look for himself. She chatted to him in her convincing fashion and shortly he was on the radio, checking what the situation was. More chatter followed and Rong and I were waved onto the road, down past the hotmix machine and on to freedom. Several other vehicles followed.

There was no particular reason why traffic was delayed for hours at a stretch. The only rational explanation was that army men are not taught to think, to observe and come up with independent solutions. They do whatever they are told to do, no more, and maybe a whole lot less. If you are instructed to let the traffic through every twelve hours, why disobey those instructions and let them go every hour, as was possible in this case? Just because something is reasonable and possible is hardly the basis for doing anything, not in the Chinese "People's Liberation Army."

The road on the other side of the construction crew was old, but not that bad for travel. We started to make good time, through the endless highlands of the Tibetan Plateau. It is over a thousand kilometres across and with all of the construction, it takes time. I doubted very much if the men in the Santana had made it to Golmud on the same day, as in the past 24 hours we had done barely two hundred kilometres. Not unless they possessed the sort of charm that Ms Rong could exercise with handsome young men.

From here on, we could see construction works for the railway to Tibet. This had been long planned and had now been under construction for a year or two, with completion scheduled for about 2009. Much has been made of the difficulties faced in building this link, but railways have been constructed in far more challenging terrain, even in China. Altitude and permafrost would seem to be the principal impediments faced by the workers and engineers. Quite a lot of the road seemed to crack up due to unstable foundations, a far more serious problem with railways. Cars can negotiate lumpy and potholed roads, but trains cannot use wonky tracks on shifting embankments.

Much of the roadworks and a fair proportion of the traffic were related to rail construction. As is the usual style in China, construction was proceeding over hundreds of kilometres all at once. I had seen the works coming the other way, but at the time was rather preoccupied with some of the basics, such as where to buy fuel and particularly the little matter of entering Tibet without a permit. This time I could observe more. Permafrost-free embankments require excavation down to bedrock and then filling with fresh crushed stone. A great deal of digging and transportation of fill was necessary, meaning the highway was packed with trucks filled with stone, or else trucks returning to the quarry. Bridge building was an activity undertaken on the most heroic scale and certainly the most photogenic.

As we travelled, we could see men and machines busy for hundreds of kilometres. In fact, it was my impression that so much had been achieved in less than two years that the proposed 2009 completion was too far away (*in fact, the first train ran to Lhasa in May 2007*). Though of great economic benefit to someone, you have to wonder if it will not bring the Tibetans far more Chinese settlers and particularly army personnel than they really need. This could be a fine opportunity to continue through to India, but I doubt if the Chinese will entertain the possibility for a long time.

## Crossing the Tibetan Plateau



**Compacting the railway embankment**

Bugger. AGAIN. Not a soul had passed by the other way for ages and again we knew what the reason was. By this stage we were approaching Golmud, now only ninety kilometres away. It was the mid-afternoon and by rights we should be there by sunset. If you have not seen oncoming traffic for a few hours though, you could bet there was a humdinger of a traffic delay somewhere close in front.

We joined another queue, waiting apparently for something to be done about a bridge ahead. Unusually, this delay was beside a spring, a really major one called the Kunlun Springs. There were huge quantities of water erupting nearby, so much so that it was a source of astonishment that so much water could emerge from a hole in the ground. A factory had a series of pipes leading to it, it being a water-bottling works. This would be an opportunity to fill our tank with water while we waited.



**Traffic snafu at Kunlun Springs**



It was quite difficult to establish what work was being done. After parking, I walked up around the bend, to find cars, trucks and buses all arranged higgledy-piggledy on a bridge, no-one being able to go forward, no-one could go back, no-one would give way to anyone else. There did seem to be some minor works going on, but the disruption seemed mostly to be driver-created. This could take five minutes to resolve, or several hours. Were there someone in authority who could actually force people to behave reasonably, it could be sorted very quickly, but it is difficult to find anyone in these circumstances who has authority or any driver who will behave reasonably. We settled in, expecting quite a long stay.

Being next to a spring, it offered opportunities to cook and wash as well as fill our water tank. I set up the table and stove and whipped up a meal. Ms Rong trotted to and fro, collecting pure fresh spring water for our onward journey.

After eating, I joined her and went down to collect more water. There was quite a lot of rubbish around the spring, as it was used as a picnic area and maybe there had been traffic jams here for months. What truly astonished me was that someone had slaughtered an animal – probably a goat – and left the entrails to rot right next to the spring. They were actually quite fresh and I would have cleaned it up, if I had had a suitable bag and there were somewhere to dispose of it. The last thing I wanted to cart around in the car was a bagful of goat gizzards, so I left them there. Maybe the water-bottling works would clean up the area around the inlet for their supplies, or maybe they would not.

After a couple of hours, the traffic jam suddenly was clear and we were able to proceed. To this day, I do not know what caused it, except that such occurrences are common in China whereas in the Western world, we would keep to our own side of the road rather than blocking the way for oncoming vehicles.

While we were waiting, a truckload of Tibetans pulled up, on their way home after performing a pilgrimage to Lhasa. They too set up and prepared themselves a meal while they waited. Ms Rong took my camera and went off to take some photos, as you can see in the following montage.

There was also a British tourist in a bus, a young man who was adventuring in Asia. He was the first native English speaker I had met for weeks, since Ms Rong had moved me out of the Friendship Hotel backpacker joint. Just as we became engaged in conversation, the traffic started to move and that was the end of it. One of the pains of travel that you meet people, only for an instant, never to see them again.



Tibetan pilgrims taking a rest from being in the back of a truck

We were moving again, towards Golmud, only ninety kilometres away. Maybe we would be there before dark, but who can tell? Travel in this country is so unpredictable.

Soon we were passing through stunning canyon country, the same as I had seen coming the other way, and then to the checkpoint where I had driven through behind the police and the ambulance. They were still looking for evil foreigners, trying to sneak into Tibet, but again they did not bother me, because I was leaving.

Only 35 kilometres to go, but it was almost dark. The next twenty kilometres were quite treacherous, full of bends where it would be easy to come unstuck if you were not careful. I thought of the minivan I had seen here, that had rolled as it went around a bend, and the row of rucksacks lying next to the road. I took my time, I was careful at bends and shortly we were on the straight approaches to Golmud, only about ten kilometres away.

A figure was standing on the road in front, waving for me to turn around. Rong wound down the window and asked what the matter was, to be told that there were more roadworks and that we had to turn around. It was almost ten o'clock, I was tired and hungry, and here people were, doing roadworks at some crazy hour. "Why did they not have someone back there?" I asked. A number of trucks were now also doing a U-turn, to go back to the detour.

As I drove off the road, I was directed into the dark by a man with a torch. Following his directions, I quickly found myself bogged to the axles in soft sand. All around were dozens of other bogged vehicles, swirling dust, bewildered drivers and ever more headlights coming towards us, to end up in the same predicament. I jumped out, ran over to the person who directed everyone into this mess, shouted at him, waved my fist and chased him here, chased him there and made sure he did not direct anyone else into the soft boggy sand. Ms Rong thought I was crazy. Me? Crazy? Is it not the roadworks department that is crazy, directing traffic into soft desert sand in the dark?

Ms Rong rounded up a few people to give us a push, while I let down the right hand tyres of the vehicle. I would have let down the ones on the left as well, but there were willing pushers and I had to drive, so I drove straight out of the bog, through more swirling dust pierced by the headlights of oncoming vehicles, through the disorganisation and chaos, another kilometre or so of soft sand with bogged cars, and back out onto the main road. I gently coaxed the van with its two very flat tyres into Golmud and by midnight we had a room at the Golmud Friendship Hotel. Then we went to find something to eat.

Golmud had a quite active nightlife, centred on a collection of pool tables and a strip of restaurants. Even after midnight on a weekday, there were people in the streets. Some of these were lit by some very colourful lights, perhaps injecting interest into what is otherwise an isolated desert town.



**Street lighting in Golmud**



## Traversing Qinghai

A number of things needed to be attended to in Golmud before we could continue our journey to the east. The most pressing items on the to-do list concerned the car. After the shenanigans in the dunes the night before, it had two left-hand tyres at normal pressure and two right-hand ones that were quite flat. Even with only two of the four tyres at low pressure, it had been easy to get out of the sand. I suppose I should have shared this knowledge with the scores of other vehicles stuck in the fine, powdery sand late at night, but I didn't. Trying to explain to people using English why they should let down their tyres would have been hard work and quite unrewarding. Those who noticed a little 2WD Wuling suddenly outmanoeuvring Jeeps in the dunes would have been mystified.

Driving on paved urban streets with two flat tyres on the right is a struggle. It was quite difficult keeping the vehicle on the road. In short order, I found a grotty, greasy, shabby workshop with a compressor and he charged four yuan to reinflate my tyres. His skills did not extend to changing the air filter.

With all the dust the night before, driving through what seemed like a sandstorm to by-pass some roadworks, the air cleaner had become choked. It was probably on its way out anyway, having travelled all the way from Lhasa Toyota to Mt Everest and back to Golmud. But actually, it was not that far: only about 2500km altogether. It was just that so many of the roads were dusty, and then to top it off, I had had to drive along a desert sand-dune side-track. The vehicle was performing pathetically.

To exchange the air filter, I had to go to the authorised Wuling agent. Considering that they are one of the most common vehicles in China, you would not think it so difficult to find a place that did parts and service, but you thought wrong. It was a puzzle indeed to find the Wuling agents, even with Ms Rong's superior Chinese language ability. One of the very real difficulties is that most people do not know anywhere far beyond the few streets which they hang out in for most of their lives. They don't have inquisitive souls and wheels to move them around, so they stay where they are. If someone asks how to get to a place five kilometres away, they have no idea. Most of the population of Golmud did not know the street where the Wuling dealer lived.

After some kerfuffle, we were inside quite a small premises that sold Wuling parts. I wanted an air filter and also needed the suspension bushes replaced. With all the rough roads, the rubber sleeves which remove some of the jolts as you drive over big holes had simply died, fallen out or run away. Whatever, they were no longer there and every time you hit a little bump, the back of the vehicle sounded as though someone was bashing on the floor with a sledge hammer. My pathetic toolkit was not really sufficient to do this myself, and anyway, why skin your knuckles when someone else is prepared to do all the work for so little money? The mechanic fitted the air cleaner and the rear suspension bushes, all for 25RMB (about \$US3) for parts and labour. He was not blessed with a workshop, so performed the job in the street.

With the vehicle attended to, we could obtain some provisions, principally vegetables and eggs, then hit the road.

At this juncture, I should reflect for a few minutes on the town of Golmud.

Messrs Lonely Planet, in their wisdom, described it as a “godforsaken hole.” I rather felt they must have had a bad day there. It is out in the desert, but the streets are tree-lined, there was an adequate central area with shops, department stores and things to do. If you got around a bit, there were fresh food markets, wide streets and even modern subdivisions with large blocks of the ubiquitous beige-and-white tiled concrete flats. It even has some of the most colourful street lighting I have seen anywhere. Not Shanghai perhaps, but better than many towns in far-flung parts of China. It probably helped that I could cruise around the town in the luxury of my own wheels, whereas LP’s informant probably had to hoof it during a dust storm.

Indeed, one of the memorable characteristics of Golmud was its motor transport. Like many municipalities, it must have had its own vehicle assembly works, probably called something like “The Golmud Municipality 5<sup>th</sup> People’s Motor Assembly Works.” It would be a large, antiquated, disorganised and dirty establishment, with thousands of ill-paid workers slaving over lathes, presses and production lines, painstakingly assembling the very latest thing in three-wheeled transport.

I failed to photograph their product for posterity, but Golmud’s local car was a taxi, a quite modern four-doored fibreglass chariot with three wheels and, judging from its performance, a two-cylinder, 5-stroke engine. I am joking about the 5-stroke engine, but anything is possible. The Chinese have something of a fetish for strange three (and five-!!) wheeled vehicles. You do not have alignment problems if there is only one wheel at the front, but there are a variety of safety issues with handling and braking.

As you left Golmud, there was a toll station and you had to pay 5RMB. Every vehicle from outside the municipality had to pay to enter the city, then pay to leave again. As there were huge convoys of trucks (bound for Tibet) on an almost daily basis, their revenue from this little scam must have been significant, especially as the trucks had to pay rather more than I did. Or maybe they did not pay at all.

As I departed from the toll station, I put my foot down on the pedal and there was positively neck-snapping acceleration. “Charles, drive responsibly!” Ms Rong instructed me.

“I am doing 90 kilometres per hour,” I responded. It was simply that after so much travel at very high altitude, then dawdling around town with the air cleaner choked up, the sudden new lease of life was a surprise. I had forgotten that my little van had a one litre fuel-injected engine that could perform adequately at least. Then we headed out into the desert.

## Traversing Qinghai

With the late night before, thus a late start in the morning, fiddling around with the vehicle and so on, we were not on the road until 1:30pm.



The desert does not offer that much to see: long stretches of beautiful bitumen road stretching to the horizon, plenty of sand, a few wisps of grass that offer all that there is in the way of vegetation, and plenty of mountains. Here is a herd of Bactrian camels sighted near the road.



The highway from Golmud out to the east was in the same condition as when I came the other way, if not better. There had been some roadworks on the outward journey, but it was done in a sensible fashion and caused no-one any inconvenience. Mind you, it sort of helps that there is plenty of space so that side-tracks and so on are not an issue. We made great time, but then, we had

## Traversing Qinghai

to. I was due back in Chengdu for the new academic year starting on September 1<sup>st</sup> and today was the 26<sup>th</sup> of August.

In the evening, maybe after nine, we finally had to stop and camp. Much of the way was rather wind-swept and open, but at last we spied a track leading off to a village in the distance. With the considerable heavy traffic moving along the road at night, it would not be conducive to a good night's sleep to just set up a tent next to the road. When I woke up in the morning, it was beautiful, with the green fields and in the distance, a glimpse of the snowy Kunlun Mountains.



**Central Qinghai camp with glimpses of the snowy Kunlun**



**Mongolian yakherders' camp with Beijing jeep**

We were quite relaxed about getting going in the morning, knowing that it would be an easy day's drive of about 400km to Xining (pron. *Shee ning*). In



fact, we covered the distance in about five or six hours, passing Qinghai Hu again and encountering Mongolian yak-herders this time.

You might recall that coming the other way, I had met Tibetans and beekeepers. The yak-herders were dressed in traditional costume and driving their animals along the main road. I would have thought them Tibetans, but the two peoples have a very close religious, cultural and linguistic relationship, so they are difficult to distinguish. In fact, Mongolian areas stretch through western China, all the way to the Tibetan border and Tibetan areas stretch almost to Mongolia.

I took my time with the herds of yak and sheep, taking the opportunity to appreciate the view of the lake and particularly the women as they drove their herds. One source of amazement was that an activity as prosaic as droving a herd of animals was done dressed in the finest clothing and even jewellery.



**Tibetan (or Mongolian?) women herding yak**

At this point we had almost completed our journey through Qinghai. This province had offered seemingly endless blue skies, sweeping views over green landscape and rugged, incised mountains. “Qinghai” itself means “Green Sea”. It implanted itself in my mind as the most beautiful of China’s provinces, and a place I would prefer to live in for a long time. What would I do here for a living? One need that was apparent was the shortage of roadhouses.

Only occasionally could I find anywhere to buy petrol. The facilities available were basic and catered only for petrol and diesel sales. The stations did not supply engine oil, compressed air, water to top up your radiator, anything to clean your windscreen, nor a toilet. “Service” is not in the vocabulary of the Chinese oil industry. What I had in mind was a place where you could fuel, oil, mechanical service, a meal, relax in comfort and accommodation. Such

facilities were noticeable by their absence in the west of China, yet there was plenty of traffic. Every day, we saw scores of buses, carrying passengers to Golmud and Lhasa from cities throughout eastern China, particularly Chengdu. Surely these passengers needed to get out occasionally and stretch their legs, have a meal and go to the toilet?

The problem I could see with a roadhouse on the way across Qinghai is that it would become a magnet for the heavy trucks that travel to Tibet and elsewhere. You would need a huge truck parking area which would become a sea of dust, dirty diesel oil, noise, rubbish and urinating, defecating drivers. Your toilets would become a real problem. Whether they would actually pay for anything would be a question.

I continue to entertain the vision of a clean, green roadhouse with trees and gardens, motel, restaurants, toilets and showers, fuel, workshops and a place for people to rest in dignity. In particular, I would cater for the long-distance cyclists who came my way, offering them a place to camp in peace on green grass.

Somewhere along the lakeshore we saw a bus parked outside a roadhouse and from the sign on the front, we could see that its destination was Chengdu. At times like this, it is worth stopping and asking the advice of the driver.

The driver was a youngish man, maybe thirty-five. While his passengers were in the “roadhouse”, he was taking the opportunity to attend to something with the engine. I looked and saw that it was a big, turbocharged six-cylinder diesel engine. Rong showed him a map and asked what route he took and about the condition of the road. He looked askance at the Wuling and thought it would have a struggle with the route he was following. He recommended that we continue through Xining and continue much of the way towards Lanzhou (pron. *Lun joe*) before turning right and taking a reasonable back route through the mountains.

Soon enough, we had covered the hundred-kilometre long southern shoreline of Qinghai Lake, then climbed slightly into the mountains before a descent into Xining.

Qinghai Lake is the largest lake in China, formed by tectonic forces that have thrown up a barrage of mountains across the course of a river. It is brackish and supports a unique fish fauna, including sturgeon. The fish are exploited by a fleet of boats moored around the margins of the lake, indeed they are overexploited. The Chinese are trying to do something about the situation, particularly with the sturgeon, which are faced with extinction. As the climate dries, the lake level is gradually falling and many towns and particularly fishing jetties are stranded high and dry, hundreds of metres from the water.

Tibetan settlements dot the lake frontage and continue into the mountains beyond. This area was actually Amdo, one of the ancient provinces of Tibet and the Dalai Lama was born between here and Xining. About thirty kilometres from the lake, we came to the self-same town from which we had

been towed after the starter motor breakdown about five weeks earlier. It had been built in a pseudo-Tibetan style (but out of concrete) with all the signs being in Chinese. One day, some day, the Chinese will recognise that the Tibetan language is actually central to the culture.



**pseudo-Tibetan architecture, Chinese sign**

*At this stage the town was still under construction and only a few signs had been erected. In 2006, I passed through the town again, to find it so totally plastered in Chinese-language signs that its “Tibetan” architectural features were virtually invisible.*

This town was at about 3000 metres: from here we had a long downhill descent to Xining, the same downhill descent as that done at night with a flat battery and no lights. It was now mid-afternoon and the mountain road offered no terrors at all with the lights unnecessary, the engine running and the brakes working. However, it was awesome to consider driving down here in the dark, scary, shocking even. There were plenty of places where we could have gone for a long drop if we had left the road. Mind you, I was well aware of this eventuality at the time and kept my eyes open. Rather than taking several hours to get into Xining, it was a comfortable one-hour journey and we were in the city centre. Considering our time constraints – it was now the August 27<sup>th</sup> and I had to start work on September 1<sup>st</sup>. We would press on towards Lanzhou, then head south on one of the very few roads to Sichuan Province, passing through Hezuo and Zoige. My road atlas showed a motorway connecting Xining and Lanzhou, about 200km distant, maybe a two-hour journey.

While driving out of Xining, there was a long row of petrol stations on the left hand side of the road. I drove into one of them, a huge establishment with about thirty pumps and undercover parking for about fifty trucks. I filled up at the 90 octane bowser, 11 litres costing 30yuan (about \$US 4). Fuel was cheap, but on the other hand the motorway tolls were severe. The eleven litres

of fuel was almost enough to cover the distance to Lanzhou, but how much would the tolls be?

The motorway entry was some kilometres east of the petrol station and, as I drove towards it, the car started to miss and splutter. I had suffered this before, finding that just after filling up I sometimes was faced with a malfunctioning engine. Indeed, in Tibet I had encountered a petrol station which sold only 70 octane petrol. This may be adequate at 4000m or more, but down here in Xining, it would be a different matter. I certainly did not want to cough and splutter all the way along the motorway for the next 200 kilometres, wondering if the car was going to suddenly stop. I executed a U-turn and coughed and spluttered all the way back to the fuel station and Ms Rong told them to put it right.

“Meio wanti” the friendly girls at the fuel station told us and we siphoned out a lot of fuel from the tank into a galvanized watering-can. A similar quantity of 93 octane fuel was put into the tank and off we went. The coughing and spluttering stopped, the car performed normally and soon we were at the on-ramp for the motorway.

This motorway actually blessed us with a schedule of prices. For a vehicle like mine, it was 0.45 yuan per kilometre (roughly 8 US cents), so it would probably cost us 100 yuan for the use of a wonderful road. We took our ticket and entered the motorway, which ran for most of its way down the course of the Yellow River. This was motoring! High, yellow loess cliffs on one side, high yellow loess cliffs on the other. The landscape was quite grand.

Unfortunately, the road atlas had shown a motorway which was not yet completed. This was a common problem with the atlas: someone in the Ministry of Transport must have given the publishers a wish-list of roads they wanted to build, as though it was fact. The atlas was full of wishful-thinking motorways, as I was to discover over the years. Only the first bit of the Xining-Lanzhou expressway had been completed, though many more kilometres were under construction. Many of these under-construction bits of motorway were on pylons in the middle of the river, a challenging environment in which to build a motorway. It certainly minimized disruption on the existing road, for which I am eternally grateful.

So, after 25 kilometres of motorway, we were back on the bog-standard Xining-Lanzhou road, which had one advantage I suppose: it was free. It also was slow, so the journey became far more protracted than I had had in mind.

This road followed the course of the Yellow River, winding and cutting its way down the the yellow mountains that stood on either side of use. This we followed for several hours until we came to one particularly spectacular stretch. The road wound tortuously around the mountains with the river far below and it was somewhere here that there was a turnoff to Sichuan Province that headed south, beside and then over the river, to Hezuo and Zoige and finally to Chengdu. Shortly it would be dark and we were sixty kilometres from Lanzhou. Then we came to the turnoff.



“That must be the road to Sichuan. Let’s turn here and go and find a place to camp.”

“I know a nice hotel in Lanzhou,” was Ms Rong’s reply.

“But we are sixty kilometres from Lanzhou and we will have to come back here in the morning. If we turn off now and camp, it will save a lot of time.”

“I want to stay in a hotel, not camp. I will pay.” It was not the money that was the issue, but I could see that driving into Lanzhou was going to take time and then we would have to come out the following day. I was quite tired enough as it was, having driven nearly five hundred kilometres for the day. A brief discussion followed and Ms Rong won the day. We would go into Lanzhou.

Long before reaching the outskirts of Lanzhou, it was dark. The road was not lit, not well-marked and I simply had to take my time. This meant covering no more than twenty or thirty kilometres in an hour, stopping frequently for the traffic, which was becoming increasingly dense. Then there were police on the road, sending us off on some diversion. Rong asked what the problem was, to be told that there was a major poison gas leakage at a chemical works by the road. We would have to cross the river and take a diversion on the other side.

Just to put you in the picture, Lanzhou has the filthiest air of any city in China and probably the world. It has gained this status by housing much petrochemical industry with its very Dickensian attitude to the environment. The river is for discharging your liquid wastes and the air is for discharging the gases. I had been in Lanzhou for a few days in 1981 and (memorably) got the very worst case of bronchitis I had ever suffered. I recall the city being forever in a grey cloud, covered in dust and populated by a couple of million factory denizens.

For twenty kilometres, we followed the diversion along the north bank of the Yellow River, along with hundreds of other vehicles, on unlit dirt track through sleepy villages which now had a cataclysmic flow of traffic. Often we were stalled for extended periods in the dark and the dust, waiting for something to resolve itself up front somewhere. Then we resumed our journey. This took hours and still we had over thirty kilometres to go.

Finally, we crossed another bridge and were on the arterial road into central Lanzhou. Despite being the arterial road, it was still slow, choked with traffic but now at least we could see people, lights and business being transacted. But whenever we came to an intersection, there was a sign somewhere pointing us to Lanzhou city centre. At least we were not lost.

The streets widened, there were proper lights and everywhere there were modern cars. Despite its questionable status as the most polluted city, some people had money enough to afford quite nice sedans, the bulk of which

## Traversing Qinghai

seemed to be Volkswagens. I wondered how long they would last in the acid rain. Does a car in pH2.2 rust away? But we were still quite a way from the railway station, even as we passed through kilometre after kilometre of shopping and restaurant districts, past big buildings covered in coloured neon, crowds of smartly-dressed young people and forever more shiny new cars. The streets were lined with the most elaborate light standards, having a hundred times the cost and a hundred times as many light bulbs as are necessary. Either you have not made it and live in the dark, or else you have, and live in a place flooded with light. This was different to the Lanzhou I visited briefly in 1981.

Finally, at nearly midnight, the Lanzhou Central Station hove into view. Opposite was the hotel that Ms Rong had in mind, a hotel she had stayed in sometime in the past and for which she felt some particular attachment. I pulled into the carpark and she went in to negotiate a price. It was quite an elaborate establishment with a spacious foyer and lifts which whizzed us up to the tenth floor, a porter carrying our baggage and a bellhop to show us to our room. It was a comfortable room with a view of the station and hot showers. It cost Rong 98 yuan for the night. After three hours of driving in the dark, I was not feeling in the best of tempers and was not about to volunteer to pay.



**Lanzhou railway station by night**

## Gansu

Gansu Province marks the beginning of what I would call “China Proper”. Officially, Tibet, Qinghai, Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang are part of China, nearly half of it actually. The problem with this point of view is that historically they are not and the people who live in them are not Chinese. By rights they should be independent nations, but that is not likely to happen in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, Gansu is recognisably Chinese. The people who live there look like Chinese and speak Chinese, though many of them are Muslims, so not quite mainstream.

Extensive tracts of Gansu are *not* Chinese. That is something I came to understand soon enough. It is a real hodge-podge of Tibetans in the mountains and Muslim Chinese in the lowlands, plus a lot of regular Han in the towns and cities.

Lanzhou is the capital of Gansu, built on the banks of the Yellow River, and is home for a couple of million people. My visit in 1981 had been cursory, as I arrived one day by air, stayed a night or two in a hotel, then travelled by train out to the west, ending up in Lenghu in the west of Qinghai. My impressions of Lanzhou at that time were of a dusty, polluted city where the trees were bare, few people were in the streets and most of the public transport was via pedicabs. I did travel in a bus from the airport, but that was a rarity.

In 1981, I was told that I would be met when I arrived at Lanzhou airport. After getting off the plane, I waited around in the bare and grubby airport building for half an hour for someone to come up to me and welcome me to Lanzhou. In the end a member of the airport staff herded me onto a bus and I rode into the Lanzhou. It was a long ride. The road went through endless bare, yellow, rugged ranges, never a sign of green, never any settlement, until after rather more than an hour I arrived in the city. I was at the terminus of the airport bus route, after which another person took me to a bus and accompanied me to the Lanzhou Friendship Hotel. They knew what to do with strangers in town. The hotel receptionist was expecting me and soon enough I was in a room.

Within minutes, an English-speaker turned up. He was the official interpreter and had gone in a car with a driver to the airport, only to find that I had already gone and he had to return without me. He apologised profusely and that was the end of the matter. No worries mate. I was getting used to this sort of thing as the company I worked for was forever telling me I would be met at the airport and when I arrived there was no-one.

One thing I could not help but notice about Lanzhou airport in 1981 was that it doubled as an airforce base. You had to walk past a row of shabby-looking MIGs to get from your plane to the terminal. Photography was probably not permitted. I wonder if anything has changed in that department.

In the morning, we had breakfast in the hotel dining room. In retrospect, I suspect this was one reason Ms Rong wanted to stay at the place – the

smorgasbord of rice, pickles, eggs, vegetables and meats which comprise a traditional hotel breakfast in China. I found it quite enjoyable, though the meat dishes probably accounted for seventy percent of what was available. Maybe it was for this that we had driven so far the night before.

Breakfast over, it was time to pack and depart. I took everything out to the car while Ms Rong dealt with the woman at the cash register. While I was packing, I was a bit taken aback to see a couple of very substantial marijuana bushes growing in the hotel carpark, plainly visible from the street and from the railway station opposite. One was male, the other female, but a bit young for harvesting.

Lanzhou had changed a lot since my stay 21 years earlier. Where there had been a smoky, brown, filthy station, now there was a huge glass-and-concrete affair with a vast carpark out front. Then there were pedicabs, now there were Volkswagen Santana taxis. The bitumen street paving had been changed for sure and probably even the trees. The hotel I was staying in certainly was not the same premises as that I had been in, all those years ago, and the restaurants were completely different.

This was the only place in China that I had visited in 1981 and had seen again in 2002. There was absolutely nothing, not the buildings, the streets, the trees or traffic that were the same. The people had changed too. Back then, when I stopped to do anything (such as eat in a restaurant) a crowd of fifty, clad in frayed blue Mao suits, would gather around and stare. Now, no one took the slightest bit of notice. Oh. There was one thing that remained unchanged. The air was the same: it was still the same disgusting polluted air as in 1981.

The dose of bronchitis I suffered in 1981 including a raging sore throat. This was something I had to see a doctor about and the interpreter and hotel arranged for one to visit. There was a special medical suite in the hospital, the doctor told me to “open wide” in Chinese, the interpreter then repeated “open widely” in English and the doctor looked down my throat and ummed and ahed and prescribed some medicine. The medication was produced and explained to me: take ten of them in the back of your throat, no more, no less. There were a whole bunch of little black balls about the size and shape of mustard seeds. I dutifully took ten and waited for ten seconds, and the pain had disappeared completely. A couple of treatments later, the sore throat was finished. This magical remedy was something I thought that should be introduced to the West, so I kept the little phial and its black ball contents and took them back to Australia. The following year I met some Chinese pharmacy students, who informed me that the magical ingredient was opium.

We got into the van and were off, back out of Lanzhou, back the way we came, more or less. Fortunately, the gas leak had stopped and we could use the main road out. One striking thing was the residential development for kilometre after kilometre along the riverfront, the same white-tiled buildings everywhere. It looked a whole lot tidier than the 1981 Lanzhou I recalled.





**Volkswagen Santana with blocks of flats on the opposite of the Yellow River**

“Here’s where we could have turned off last night,” I said to Rong as we climbed an incline in some rather rugged terrain by the river. “Hezuo 120km,” read the sign (in Chinese characters of course). Was this true? The signs are usually in error, quite often by as much as 50%. In any case, we had to follow up the north side of the river, make a crossing, then get to Hezuo. I knew nothing about the place, except that it was on the way to Sichuan.

“Didn’t you enjoy your evening in Lanzhou?” Rong reacted.

“No, as a matter of fact, I did not. It has been a huge amount of driving for no good reason.” Had we turned off without making the deviation to Lanzhou, we could quite possibly have driven to Hezuo that evening. In any case, it was now midday. There were some compensations though.

Lanzhou Railway Station was the first place at all in China where my trails had crossed, where I visited a place in 1981 and returned. The contrast between the modern, capitalist Lanzhou and that which was still enveloped in the fog of the Cultural Revolution was incredible. It was a contrast between an entire population dressed in Mao jackets, living in a dusty, brown depressing city with absolutely nothing to do, and one where the young at least could cruise down to the bar district or restaurants or whatever in their cars, girlfriend in tow. Lanzhou in 1981



**Lanzhou under construction**

had a couple of depressing places where you might get something to eat: now it had thousands of glitzy restaurants and bars, all covered in gold knobs and with polychrome neon flashing so as to induce an epileptic fit. Inside there were thousands of girls, waiting to provide male customers with beer and a good time. How China had changed!

We turned off the Lanzhou-Xining “highway” and headed south towards Sichuan. It was all much the same, travelling next to the river and watching countryside go by. After a while we came to a large lake where the river had been, a bit of a problem because our hopeful road atlas of China showed the road crossing the river at a bridge. Whatever could this mean?



Getting closer, I could see a fair queue of trucks waiting, and in the distance was a ferry. It was coming towards us, so with any luck we would cross on that. Well, not quite. The ferry pulled in, unloaded its vehicles and all those in front, bar one, drove on. We did not make it, but were second in line. Meanwhile, we would make ourselves comfortable, prepare a meal and enjoy the scenery. It was nearly two hours before the ferry returned.



As the ferry approached, I saw a long line of black vehicles turn up. “I bet they push in front,” I commented to Ms Rong. They were lead by a police car.

“Why do you say that?” she asked.

“Because that is the Party and they always get priority. I have seen it quite a few times.”

“Of course not! They are ordinary people and will wait in line like everyone else.”

“I guarantee you they will push in front.”

“No they won’t. Party members don’t get any special treatment.”

“We shall see.”

Within minutes, the long line of black cars started edging past others in the queue. I had considered this issue, not because I had been expecting a Party picnic to turn up, but I had expected some disorderly conduct by queue-jumpers in general. As you can see, the ramp was elevated some distance above ground level – about half a metre – so those who wanted to get in front had to wait for the ferry to unload first before they made their move. The Party party had snuck up as far as they could without blocking the discharging vehicles. I watched how things worked out.

While I had been waiting, I sat on an easy chair in the middle of the empty lane, just to make sure that no goon in a big black car could get past. One did actually, a large man and his large off-sider in a black Audi A6, both looking like gangsters, which they probably were. He just pushed me off the road, and barged in front. A human on the road is nothing to them: I had to make sure that there was a vehicle. Even the police escort could do little about that.

The ferry docked and quickly discharged its load of vehicles. The moment they were gone, the Party queue started to move. “Get in quick!” I told Ms Rong, both of us jumped in, the windows wound up and the central locking switched on. I had no doubt that the authorities would pull us from the car if necessary to get the Party past. I knew that they would have no answer to two determined people with their doors locked.

The queue-wallah promptly motioned for us to stay where we were and beckoned the Party group towards him. I started the engine and pulled the car out into the empty lane, blocking their access to the ferry and at the same time putting me in a position where I could get on easily. The queue wallah started shouting. He banged on the car. He motioned to get back and wait. I stood my ground while Ms Rong wound down the window a bit and started shouting back. She was livid. We had been waiting for two hours and now this bunch of Party hacks and their sex partners were about to jump in front, leaving us to wait two more hours. The shouting went on and on. There was nothing they could do because we had the car locked and they could not get in, much as



they would have liked. Rong kept shouting, screaming abuse at them. She was a Party member too and she had been proved wrong. I have no idea what she said but I can guarantee it was uncomplimentary.



The stand-off continued for ten minutes and then suddenly they gave in. They could see we would not and until they capitulated, no-one was getting on the ferry. The Party party wanted to go on their rally, not get held up by a bunch of ill-educated slobs kicking a car, screaming, shouting, swearing and getting nowhere. Suddenly everything changed, and we were motioned to drive onto the ferry.

The Party streamed on behind us, as did the truck that had been in front of us, and off we went. There had been 18 Party cars, twenty places on the ferry, and we would have got on anyway. I guess the capitulation occurred when someone added up the number of Party cars and the number of spaces in the ferry and realised that they could make it despite us going first. I cannot imagine what all the other people in the queue thought. Had I been Chinese, Rong was pretty sure I would have been beaten up by their police escort.



**Party fat cats and their cars on the ferry**



As most of these vehicles were carrying just the driver and maybe one (usually young female) passenger, they could have used a bus. That, however, is not the way the Communist Party of China does things. They love to tear around on rallies through the countryside with a police escort out front to clear all the lesser mortals from their path. Nor can you fondle your “secretary” in a bus.

During the crossing, the party people would not even look at us, let alone smile or engage us in conversation. If there is one thing the Communist Party of China does not like, it is someone getting the better of them. On the other side, we pulled over and let them all pass. A huge cloud of dust and the screaming of engines marked their route up the cliffs and into the unknown heartland of Gansu. I took my time, stopping to savour the view from the top of the gorge, wondering if I would ever see the Yellow River again.

Our route took us through villages where the wheat harvest had been cut and stacked into stooks. The straw was wrapped around posts, for what purpose I could not say, but it all looked quite picturesque.



Late in the afternoon we arrived in the town of Hezuo. By the outskirts was a Tibetan religious building about nine stories high, which I later learned had been there for hundreds of years and served as a sort of art gallery up until the Cultural Revolution, at which time it met the end that met the vast majority of Tibetan religious buildings. The contents at least were totally vandalized.

The entire central area of Hezuo was utter chaos. The town was in the throes of a bout of modernization, including the installation of sewers, water supply and underground power. This was being done at the same time as a complete makeover of the streets. Rather than do things piecemeal, every street in the entire town had been dug up at once. It was not as though you could see much work going on, but you could see a great deal of mud. Navigating through this was a hassle and we were pleased to get out the other side, even if that meant the end of the bitumen. From here on, we had dirt road for a long way.

You might think that two adjacent large-ish provinces in the world's most populous country might have a proper sealed road between them. In fact, all that existed was a miserable rocky track for hundreds of kilometres through alpine landscape. After spending the night camped near Hezuo, we battled with this all day long, though in fairness it might be said that we covered a lot of ground. It helps if there are no massive deviations into large cities for no particular purpose.

These highlands were again very Tibetan in character. Occasionally we came across villages, the most outstanding of which was built of timber with turf roofs. "Where did the timber come from?" I wondered, to conclude that the now-barren mountains around were the source. There would not be enough to rebuild in timber when the time comes. They will have to use concrete.

These houses reminded me of Iceland, on the opposite side of the world, where traditional farmhouses were covered with turf in exactly the same way. It does wonders for the thermal qualities of the house. The Icelanders do not festoon their homes with prayer flags however.

Being the principal route between two major provinces, there was a fair amount of truck traffic. The day was filled with big trucks and big clouds of dust. The trucks travelled very slowly, usually only about 50 kph, much too slow for me if I were to be back in Chengdu to start work on September the first. It was now August 29<sup>th</sup>.

There was a huge bang as I passed a truck. I had hit something on the road. Of course, I knew exactly what it was, it was just that I could not see it for all the dust. In lieu of white-lining, some enlightened fool had placed a row of substantial rocks down the middle of the road, not everywhere, but in quite a few places. Why they do this beats me: it must be in the Chinese roadworkers' code of practice. Not only do you have to watch out for oncoming vehicles when you overtake, but also be aware of any hazards that the safety people put there for a surprise. Incredibly, the tyre was not destroyed, nor was the suspension or steering damaged.



**Tibetan farmhouses with turf roofs and prayer flags**

Here and there were the wrecks of trucks. As ever, there seemed to be no real explanation as to why they were tipped over, load strewn about, often in places where you could not imagine coming to grief. Given, however, that the trucks are forever moving, that no driver ever seems to rest, and that they go all night, it is not so astonishing. As likely as not, it is because the driver has gone to sleep at the wheel. Or else they had hit a rock on the road.



**Safety features on the main road to Sichuan province**



**Camping for the last night: the black dots are grazing yak**

We crossed the border into Sichuan province, the pass being at an altitude of 3639 metres. Approaching the highland town of Zoige, there was a Dong Feng truck ahead. As usual it was stacked high with a load and enveloped by a cloud of dust.

It was a warm day and the windows were down rather than use the airconditioning when we were surprised by a huge cloud of bees. The windscreen was promptly covered in squashed bees and quite a few dozen got inside. Drama followed: the windows were wound up and had to stay up until the truck was passed, when they went down and the interlopers shooed out. It seemed that the apiarists do not shut up the hives very effectively before moving them.

Shortly, I was in Zoige and had to call into a fuel station. As I was filling the tank, the bee truck also arrived. Not wanting to be enveloped in a swarm, I gesticulated wildly for him to stop until I was ready to leave. The driver was kind enough to wait. As soon as we could, we departed Zoige. It was dusty and concretely little town with no attractions at all. There were kilometres to cover.

We did another eighty kilometres before camping for the night on a high, cold treeless plain, altitude 3668m, 33deg06'40"N, 103deg18'08"E. We had covered 416 kilometres for the day, all of it in highlands on dirt road. It was quite windy, so I pitched the tent in the lee of the van, hoping that we would not be blown away in the night.

In the morning I rose to find the windscreen covered in frost. Though it was mid-summer, it was still quite crispy. I had put the fridge on top of the car with the lid open, thinking this the best way to get the contents cool, and I was not wrong. Everything was frozen.

To start my day, I had to have a crap, but where? Though I had driven several hundred metres away from the "road", it still seemed quite close and there were trucks going by. There was not a bush nor even a stick or a knoll to hide behind, not until you got to the hills maybe a kilometre away. I would just have to go for a stroll sufficiently far away to feel comfortable and do my stuff in full view of the passing trucks. I took my little shovel and the toilet paper out of the car and set off for a walk. As I walked, I looked at all the yak shit. Everywhere, at separations of a metre or two, were piles of yak turds. To be concerned about covering my wares seemed a little effete in the circumstances. I tried to dig a hole to find it was rock solid a few centimetres down. Maybe this was permafrost. In the end, I covered everything with a bit of moss and a few yak turds and returned to the car. Time to dig Ms Rong out of bed and get going.

We were still about ninety kilometres from Songpan and that was nearly 400km of mountain driving from Chengdu. It was going to be a long day. The longest bit was getting to Songpan, as most of the route was rather rough dirt road. After fifty kilometres, we came to a familiar Tibetan tent village and from then on we were retracing our steps. It all seemed a lot easier.

I wanted to discuss what I had seen in the various Tibetan areas with Ms Rong. "Gansu has always been part of China," she stated emphatically. "Even the Tibetan bits?" "All of it!" "How do you know?" "My government



says so.” “Is that the truth?” “What my government tells me is the truth. Let’s change the subject.” This was the usual end to any discussion about political issues with Ms Rong. You would think that a Communist Party member would love to discuss politics, but not her, nor any other Party Member I have encountered. They are all fed a pack of lies, lies which stand up very poorly to scrutiny. The most interesting thing to discuss in China is politics, but no one wants to talk about these things. They have been told what to think by the government and they dare not consider any other possibility. They would prefer to believe lies than think for themselves.

On the road was a cyclist, not a Tibetan boy cyclist doing strange things, but a Western male. I pulled up in front of him to say “hello.” And he was from Sydney, having cycled thousands of kilometres through China and elsewhere. I felt a bit of a wus, doing it all in a car when real people do it by bike. These people must be really tough. Anyway, I gave him my phone number and address in Chengdu, should he want to drop by (I never did hear from him). Then it was on to Songpan, only forty kilometres away, but mostly by dirt road.

In Songpan, I did some Tibetan paraphernalia shopping, with the reasoning that no matter what I stuffed into my car, it was no longer going to be a problem. In the evening it could all be cleared out and used to decorate my rather spartan CDUT apartment. Ms Rong spent her time in shoe shops. Maybe that was what she wanted to do in Lanzhou. By the time we left, it was nearly midday. I had a big pile of Tibetan gear, but Rong had zero shoes.

The descent from Songpan was all so much easier: going downhill in a little van with a one litre engine is so much easier than going the other way. After about an hour we were feeling a bit peckish and pulled in by a wayside restaurant. Maybe they would have something to satisfy our needs. And as I pulled in, I saw a huge thicket of marijuana bushes, all female, all in flower, just over the road from the restaurant. While Rong went in and ordered, I ducked into the bushes and started harvesting.

“The women at the restaurant say that though it looks like marijuana, it does not have the same effect.” Ms Rong had come over to offer this information. It looked like the real McCoy to me, and it smelt like it. Funny that the Chinese believe that all this marijuana that grows in thickets all over their country is not the same as the marijuana that is banned in places like America. No, it is not as strong, but if you smoke enough of it (and there is plenty to be had), it provides the same sensation. It was in Songpan that I had seen thousands of seedlings growing like weeds along the verges of the back streets. It is strange that it is so common around villages and so rare out in the mountains. It must be an accidental cultivar at best, or maybe very deliberately grown for that matter. I suspect the latter.

A few hours later, we passed through Wenchuan and now were in familiar territory. I hoped it would still be light as we travelled the last of the mountains, the bit just before Chengdu being incredibly treacherous and there being no place to stop and stay overnight.

But there was a traffic holdup. Some rocks were on the road and pebbles were tumbling down the mountainside, dislodged by the windy conditions. I stopped and waited, as trucks were coming the other way. I watched, winding down my window to get a better view of the mountainside above. There were thousands of metres of mountain, all of it bare and prone to have little rocks sent tumbling by a gust. On its way down, it could knock a bigger one, then that something larger still. Some of the rocks on the road were quite large and some incredibly brave young men ran out and plucked them from the path of the traffic.

A cluster of rocks came tumbling down the mountainside. I could see them flying downwards, apparently in slow motion. It was not slow motion though, just that they were coming a long way. A larger one bounced over the road and into the river below. It would have been doing a hundred kilometres per hour. If it had hit a car, it would make a fine mess. If it hit a human, it does not bear thinking about. From this I understood that I could see what was happening and if it happened to me, I would be dead. I kept my distance, waiting for the way to be completely clear. I wanted to get through this patch as quickly as possible, without being held up at a critical moment by oncoming trucks.



Seizing the opportunity, looking for rocks flying from above, I whizzed past as fast as my little car would carry me. A few seconds later, we were clear.

Shortly after dark, we were in Chengdu. I drove around to the opposite side of the city to drop Ms Rong off outside her flat., where she rejoined her husband and daughter. From there it was another twenty minutes before I was back on the campus of the Chengdu University of Technology, where my first duty was to call by and see Ms Wang.

The journey had covered 9984km, took 58 days and cost 12,220 yuan, of which 5,500 related to the accident at Shigatse. The car consumed 640 litres of fuel, working out to 6.4 litres per hundred kilometres. The exchange rate at the time was 8.3 yuan to the US dollar.

## Back in Chengdu

The next morning I went to see my boss, as I wanted to let her know that despite everything, I had made it back to Chengdu in time to resume work the following day.

“There won’t be anything happening for about three weeks,” she told me with a smile. “You can relax.”

Well, I would rather have been told that a week or two earlier. I could have dawdled instead of rushing back from Shigatse and taken a different route, maybe had a side-trip to Lenghu or even Xinjiang. Had I known a month earlier, I would not have had to leave Everest Base Camp in quite the hurry I did, and then maybe seen more of Tibet to the west. And I would not have been passing through that village near Shigatse at the critical moment.

It was too late for regrets. Instead I had to do something constructive. One issue was where I was going to live. Ms Rong thought I should live in an off-campus apartment and so did I. Conditions at the university were similar to an open prison in Australia: no overnight visitors, and during the day they had to register. No late nights were permitted for me either, as the front doors were locked at about 10:45pm and opened again at about seven. In fairness though, our guard (Mr Tang) slept by a doorbell which could be rung late at night or early in the morning and he would, with a certain grumpy air, open it in due course.

By moving off-campus, I could have a more spacious place with a less prison-like atmosphere. My colleague Joe was interested in joining me, as he had a lady visitor for whom the university was charging 50 yuan per night for her to stay in his room. For that sort of money, you could get quite a nice pad in Chengdu.

Ms Rong set up some appointments with various real estate agents and firstly I went with her and shortly Joe accompanied us both. One thing became crystal clear in a hurry: Ms Rong and most real estate agents thought we would be happy with absolutely filthy little concrete boxes set in large complexes with nothing but iron bars for a view. These were even more prison-like than the Foreign Guesthouse at the university. Joe and I got to see the way ordinary people lived in Chinese cities and did not much like it. The only saving grace was that they were cheap: 300 RMB per month for the most basic. We did not want a disgusting cell of 60 square metres in a complex of several thousand, piles of rubbish everywhere, non-existent kitchens and non-functioning bathrooms, and six floors of stairs to climb that stank of urine and faeces.

Joe and I quickly decided that the best strategy was to drive around parts of the city that we liked, finding apartment blocks that looked acceptable, and ask the building management. One of the nicest apartments we came across was cheap at about 1000 RMB per month but there was a catch: we would be renting from the lease-holder, not from the owner. What guarantee was there that the lease-holder would not take the six months rent she was asking in

## Back in Chengdu

advance, disappear and leave us to deal with a landlord who had not received any cash? None at all. It looked like a scam, not a genuine rental proposition. But, at last, we found the building for us. The apartment was about 120 sq metres, brand new, on the 16<sup>th</sup> floor with an amazing view, and by the river. We could go for walks in a nice green park every day.



**Foreign teacher's apartment at  
Chengdu University of Technology**

**You might think this is reasonable as flats go, but it was altogether 36 sq metres, had had no maintenance for 20 years, you were locked in for 9 hours per day, and all sorts of things kept going wrong, like the water, electricity and sewerage. Amazing television!**



## Back in Chengdu

The only catch was that it was quite expensive. The rent was altogether about 2000 RMB per month, of which I would pay half, as I had the double room with the en-suite bathroom. This was a vast improvement over the humble flat the university provided. A few days after moving in, we had a house-warming party. I invited Ms Wang and a few others of my former students to come along.



**An almost boy-free housewarming party**

The group above comprise about half the party guests in our new living-room, while the picture below is the view you had from the balcony. The tower opposite was 316 metres high, but was still under construction.



**view from my bedroom window**

What ever happened to the boy in Shigatse, whose damages I was committed to paying? I paid. As soon as I returned to Chengdu, I sent another 5000 yuan, as had been agreed. The police, in their role as judge, jury and executioner, had to assess what the total damages were, and what proportion I had to pay. Inspector Zhao Gang in Shigatse took his time, because it takes time to understand how much a head-injured person is likely to progress. The boy's family became irritated with the delay and threatened to come to Chengdu, presumably to camp on my doorstep and demand payment. This would be a highly-undesirable situation and anyway, I was quite willing to pay, but how much? It was unlikely that I would have to fork out that much more.

When the police assessment did arrive, I was told that the total damages were 67,000 yuan, and was given the option of paying 20, 30 or 40% of this. Thinking that 20% was rather mean and 40% was getting a bit generous and would encourage other parents to have their children injured on the road, I settled for 30%. As I had already paid about 11,000 yuan, it meant that I had to find another 11,000. This was not a problem and shortly it was sent to the family in Tibet, while the receipts went to the insurance company. For now I could make my claim.

The insurance company were surprisingly prompt: maybe it is not such a problem making payouts for head injuries when the total claim is only for about \$3,000. They did, however, reduce their payout to 16,000 RMB, as insurance companies always do. There is a lesson in this: do not be the victim of a traffic accident in China. Pick some other jurisdiction, where payouts are more generous, such as the United States.

Years later, I would like to know how the boy has progressed, if at all. However, I have lost the address somewhere and it is all in Chinese so it is not easy to find, even if I knew where to look. One day I might return to Shigatse and find out first hand.

In subsequent years, I went travelling through many Tibetan areas, but not in Tibet proper. All these journeys were undertaken together with Ms Wang and they were all very rewarding. One day, I might get around to describing those experiences.







# Index

- Aba 76
- Alien travel permits 32
- Architecture 43, 55, 76, 188, 198
- Army 77, 97 – 100, 113, 119, 128, 153, 167, 187, 197 - 198
- Australian Embassy 177, 179
- bank cheques 17
- barefoot doctor 48
- Barkhor Square 143
- Barkam 42
- Bath house 36
- beekeepers 103 – 104
- Beijing 3, 7
- Cyclists 11, 12, 108, 167, 170, 256
- Black tents 56, 81
- Bogged vehicles 79 – 80, 235
- Brain surgery 179
- British invasion 204
- Brothels 184
- Buddhist temples 43, 45, 48, 52, 59
- Camping equipment 21
- Campgrounds 33, 74, 87, 89, 93, 95, 96, 101, 118, 120, 221
- Canola 88, 149
- Car yards 16
- Cement factory 22,
- Checkpoints 113, 116, 153, 155, 166
- Chemical glassware 10.
- Chengdu 3, 15, 16, 258 - 262
- Chengdu University of Technology 2, 4, 259
- Children and safety 194, 212, 216, 262
- Chinese aid to Tibet 190
- CITS 149, 156
- Coal 9, 22
- communications satellites 48
- Communist Party convoys 62, 191, 202, 251-3
- Concocting evidence 191 – 194, 211
- Craniums for sale 127
- Crashes 22, 112, 151, 255
- Cultural Revolution i, 208, 249
- Dalai Lama i, 48, 128, 242
- Damxung 120
- Darlag 77
- dinosaur museum 4
- Dong Feng trucks 168
- driving examination 13 -15
- Dzongkag Pongdro 160
- English teachers 3, 4
- Everest Base Camp 162
- First aid 22, 171
- Flood 87
- Friendship Highway 153
- Foreign driver's license 15
- Fuel injection 15
- Stephen Fitzgerald 1
- Gansu Province 247 - 255
- Geological excursion 19
- Geological hazards 66, 145
- GPS 99
- Golmud 106, 109 – 111, 238
- Great Game 204
- Guards 6, 109, 198
- Gui-La Pass 157
- Gui-De 84
- Gyantse 201 – 210
  - Kumbum 208
  - Pelkor Chode 209
- Felix Greene 1
- Fortresses 122
- Han 41
- Hezuo 253
- Highway 213 39, 50
- Himalayas i, 156, 157
- Hitchhikers 54, 67, 81, 113, 161, 166, 170
- HIV 9
- Horses 57, 78, 160
- Hospital 178, 211, 214
- Hot springs 121
- Hotel 174
- India 130
- Indiana Jones 166
- Japanese backpackers 166
- Jokhang 125 - 127, 217-218
- Jiang Zemin 112
- Kangding 58
- Karma 46, 54
- Kunlun Mountains 114, 226
- Lanzhou 245 - 247
- Latse 167
- Lawyer 180, 196
- Lhasa 121 - 144 , 216 - 219
- Lhasa Toyota 140 - 142
- Lenghu (Qinghai) 108
- Luding 60,
- Long March 60, 75
- Maps 31
- Mao 1, 60, 112, 198
- Marijuana 66, 95, 248, 257
- Markets 83
- Mechanical problems 93 - 94, 140, 150, 167, 237
- Medical examination 9, 248
- Military hospital 180
- Min River 21
- Mine waste 23, 67
- Miyalou 31, 37
- Monastery 77, 130-134, 198
- Monks 87, 113, 161
- Mount Emei 12
- Music festival 185 – 187
- Nagqu 118
- Night driving 29
- Nobulingka Palace 129
- Oryx 72
- Old City of Lhasa 124
- Padlocks 200
- Panchen Lama 192, 198
- Pass 40, 77, 85, 93, 114, 115, 152, 157, 226
- Peoples Insurance Company of China 176, 181 – 183, 214
- Personal security 139
- Petrol station 54, 95, 106, 152, 243
- Photographers 63, 145
- Pilgrims 107 – 108, 126, 234
- Police 23, 33, 53, 60, 113, 116, 118, 142 - 148, 172, 174 - 214
- Pollution 4, 247
- Pony cart 154
- Pool 83
- Potala Palace 122, 123, 134 – 139, 218
- Prayer flags 35, 53
- prayer wheel 49, 59
- Qiang minority 20 - 26, 31
- Qinghai ii, 78 – 115, 234 - 244
- Qinghai Lake 92,95,101,103, 241-2
- Qomolangma Base Camp 162
- Railway 115
- Rainbows 220
- Red sandstone 85 – 86, 112
- Renting an apartment 259 - 261
- Restaurants 45, 118, 183
- Roadworthiness test 197
- Rongphu Glacier 165
- Road safety 212
- Roadhouses 117
- Road maintenance camp 73
- Roadworks 50 - 53, 61 – 62, 71, 84, 118, 145, 223
- Rubbish 37
- Sand dunes 89
- Sera Monastery 130 - 134
- Sewage 13, 32
- Shang Meng 24
- Sheep 170
- Shepherds 87, 152
- Shergar 156, 166
- Shigatse 149 – 150, 174
- Shigatse Old Town 189
- Shigatse Dzong 189 -190
- Showers 109, 183, 214
- Sino-Tibetan Treaty 143
- Smog 29, 32
- Solar power 84, 121
- Songpan 65, 67 – 69, 257
- Sturgeon 242
- Sutras 46
- Tangula Pass 114, 115, 226
- Tashilhunpo Monastery 198
- Taxi 11, 59
- Telephone interpreter 34
- Tent hotels 164
- Tiananmen Massacre ii
- Tibet, Tibetans I, 28, 31, 35, 42-44, etc...
- Tibetan Plateau 118
- Toilets 5, 40, 44, 73, 82, 102, 118, 128, 149, 168, 195
- Tolls 21, 109, 203
- Tools 169
- Tractors 22, 29, 36
- Traffic jams 224 – 233, 257
- Travel permits for Tibet 110, 111, 116
- Truck traffic 22
- Tsangpo Valley 144
- Ulang 159
- Underground power 35,
- University apartment 5, 260
- University calendar 65
- Water supply 14
- Wedding limousine 111
- Wenchuan 23, 65
- West Sichuan 31 – 64
- Work unit 15
- Xining 91 – 92, 94, 242-3
- Xinjiang 65
- Yak 57, 72, 75
- Yellow River 85 - 86, 90, 244
- Francis Younghusband 205
- Yurts 106



## **Appendix 1: Statement to Shigatse Police**

**Statement to Shigatse Police 21 August 2002, regarding liability for accident  
19km east of Shigatse on 4 August 2002 at about 8:40pm.**

FIRSTLY, I do not believe that I am significantly responsible for this accident. The victim rode his bicycle in front of my vehicle without taking any sensible precautions such as looking first or giving signals. I was travelling slowly due to a tractor moving along the road in the wrong position, but was taken completely by surprise by the cyclist's silly manoeuvre. I tried very hard to avoid him, but my scope for movement was limited by the position of the tractor and the very brief time available. I took every care not to have this accident: the boy took none.

Since the accident I have cooperated in every way I can with the police, the hospital and the boy's family. I have paid as much as possible - 4000 yuan - towards the boy's hospital expenses, have visited him frequently and am pleased to see some signs of recovery, which I expect will be lengthy and difficult. However, I MUST return to my work at the Chengdu University of Technology.

My liability in this accident is covered by the People's Insurance Company of China (PICC) who insist that I must make any claim through their Chengdu office. One reason I must return to Chengdu is to formally lodge this claim.

I am employed by the Chengdu University of Technology and am on contract with them until 30 June 2003. Presumably the PICC will settle any claim prior to that date, but even if they do not, I plan to continue my stay in China for some years.

Should it be absolutely necessary, I undertake to return to Shigatse to complete any legal formalities or participate in court proceedings.

Yours faithfully

Charles Poynton 21-8-2002 Shigatse









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Travels of a French adventurer in Gansu, Qinghai and Sichuan provinces, and a little way into Tibet, in the late 1940s

Thubten Norbu, 1961, *Tibet is my Country*, Rupert Hart-Davis, London.

The life and experiences of the Dalai Lama's elder brother, as recounted to Heinrich Harrer. Several colour photographs of the Dalai Lama and Lhasa, taken in the 1950s.

